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Imagine that you are just about to walk through the door to your dream job, but the door suddenly slams in your face. Your parents forbid you to accept it. How do you feel? What would you do next?

This very thing happened to Kate Pelham Newcomb. She dreamed of becoming a doctor, but her father refused to let her study medicine. He felt that being a physician was not a suitable profession for women. However, Kate defied the odds and became Doctor Kate.
EARLY LIFE

The Pelham household was all abuzz because of the impending arrival of a new baby. Tom and Katie Pelham already had a four-year-old named Kate, who was born on July 26, 1885. She couldn’t wait for her mother to return to their Leoti, Kansas home with the baby.

Three days passed. Why hadn’t her mother returned? When would she see her new brother or sister? Kate grew anxious. Then a short, tearful conversation with her father informed Kate that they were never coming home. Her mother had died while giving birth to her baby brother.

Shortly after his wife’s death, Tom married Kate’s godmother, Nona Fenton. Kate and Nona argued frequently; Nona had a quick temper. The family moved to Buffalo, New York in 1893.

During high school, Kate secretly became engaged to a boy named Robert. Tragically, Robert suddenly died when she was only sixteen. Losing yet another person she loved fed Kate’s desire to become a doctor. But her father disapproved of such a career for a woman, and he refused to support her.
Kate graduated from high school in 1905, and then began teaching sixth and seventh grade the next year. Kate liked working with kids, but she found it hard to discipline them.

In 1907, her father, stepmother, and four siblings moved to Boston, but Kate stayed in New York. Later that year, Nona died. Kate’s father asked her to move to Boston to help care for the family and host parties.

For six years she stayed with her family, but she disliked life in Boston. One time, she felt embarrassed when she spilled her food at a dinner party. This motivated her to speak with her father again about becoming a doctor. Seeing his daughter’s determination, Kate’s father finally agreed.

Female vs. Male Teachers in the United States

Year | Male | Female
---|---|---
1886 | 18% | 32%
1906 | 31% | 69%
1926 | 32% | 68%
1946 | 17% | 83%
1966 | 17% | 83%
1986 | 23% | 77%
2005 | 37% | 63%

In September 1913, Kate started medical school. As she set off, her father told her, “I hope when you become a doctor, you will be able to save other mothers from dying as your mother died.” Doctors have different specialties, so Kate chose to become an obstetrician to help mothers and their babies.

Kate graduated second in her class in 1917, and moved to Detroit, Michigan where she began a medical practice with three other women doctors. While there, Doctor (Dr.) Kate went with a friend to buy a car, and she met a car salesman named Bill Newcomb. The two quickly became friends and fell in love. They married in 1921.

While at a party, Dr. Kate noticed that Bill had a cough. In the coming weeks, the cough worsened, and Kate began investigating the medical case. She discovered that her husband’s lungs were unable to absorb oxygen properly. Bill was about to die, and Kate was devastated.
When the couple took long drives in the country, Bill would feel temporarily better. He became convinced that fresh, country air improved his condition, so he pleaded with Kate to let him try living in the woods in northern Wisconsin, away from the city. Kate did not want to see her husband go, but she agreed.

After two weeks, Kate visited Bill, and saw that he was remarkably better. Kate was now faced with a decision. She could either continue to work as a doctor in Michigan, or she could move and care for her husband. Kate chose Bill. In January 1922, Kate left her career behind and moved to Eagle River, Wisconsin.

Dr. Kate moved many times during her life.
Life in Northern Wisconsin

Life in the rustic woodlands was much different from the hustle of the city. Instead of entertaining at fancy parties, Kate had to chop wood, carry water from a well and use an outhouse. She even learned to cook on a wood stove. Though she was not working as a doctor, Kate enjoyed her quiet lifestyle. Bill’s health slowly improved.

In January 1922, the Newcomb’s first son arrived, but excitement turned to grief when the baby died 48 hours after his birth. Kate felt as if medicine had failed her; someone special to her had died once again. After waiting patiently for six years, Kate and Bill had another healthy boy named William Thomas Newcomb, or Tommy for short. The family expanded again when they adopted a little girl named Eldorah in 1936.
When Tommy was 3 ½ years old, he accidentally smashed his finger in the car door. Kate took her son to see Dr. Torpy, the local **physician**, who quizzed her about why she was not practicing medicine. Kate denied wanting to be a doctor, and hurried off with Tommy before the doctor could question her further.

But Dr. Torpy contacted Kate again, asking her to care for a sick neighbor. Kate started to refuse, but Dr. Torpy cut her off. He was too far away to help, and he told Kate that she must help or the woman would die. So Kate traveled to the woman’s house and saved her life. This convinced Kate of the need for doctors in the area. She regained her faith in medicine, and decided to attend the University of Wisconsin-Madison to get her Wisconsin physicians license.

Courtesy of The Dr. Kate Pelham Newcomb Museum

Dr. Kate sometimes traveled on snowshoes to her patients.
Kate resumed her profession as a doctor. She traveled hundreds of miles a week to care for patients in all kinds of weather, including blizzards. She never hesitated to strap on snowshoes or jump into a canoe to reach someone who needed her. Dr. Kate cured sick patients, vaccinated children, and delivered over 3,000 babies. Not one mother died in her care.

Have you ever wondered what you have to do to become a doctor?

Learn about Dr. Chrisper’s journey to becoming a physician.

Why did you want to become a doctor?
I have always been interested in healthcare. I like learning how individuals’ habits can affect their health. I also enjoy learning about medical advances in medications and treatments.

How long did you have to go to school?
After high school, I went to college for four years and then medical school for four years. A joke among medical school classmates was, “Can you believe we are almost in 21st grade?” After medical school is residency, and that usually takes four years to complete. This may seem like a really long time, but when you are doing something that truly interests you, it doesn’t matter.

What is the hardest thing about being a doctor?
The hardest thing about being a doctor is when things are out of my hands. One example is when there is nothing more that can be done for a patient; the miracle is not going to happen. I also work very long hours.

What is the best thing about being a doctor?
The moments where you really connect with a patient are rewarding. Medicine can also be very confusing, so I like explaining it to people. This is very important because sometimes the patient is confused or scared. Then suddenly they are on the path to understanding and getting control of what is happening.
But Kate wanted to do more. Patients in rural areas like hers traveled for hours to get to a hospital. Dr. Kate dreamed of building one, but couldn’t pursue her dream due to lack of funds. Then in 1949, the grateful husband of one of Kate’s patients donated $1,000 to the cause.

This launched a fundraising campaign to build Lakeland Memorial Hospital. The community hosted pie-baking contests and square dances to collect money. But the $50,000 they raised was not enough. Students from Arbor Vitae Woodruff High School decided to help. They began a penny collection effort and named it the Million Penny Parade. By April 1953, the class met their goal; one million pennies were collected. Dr. Kate also made a surprise appearance on a television show called This is Your Life, which inspired people all over the country to donate another $106,000.

Kate now had enough money to build the hospital. On July 21, 1954, Governor Walker J. Kohler traveled to Woodruff to attend the hospital dedication ceremony. Dr. Kate had accomplished another goal.

In 1952, the Million Penny Parade collected one million seven hundred thousand pennies.
Kate became the chief of staff at Lakeland Memorial Hospital. She worked there until she slipped on icy steps and broke her hip. A few days after her fall, Kate passed away while in surgery on May 30, 1956. But her legacy lived on. The Lakeland Memorial Hospital that she founded continued to operate until February 28, 1977. A museum was established in Woodruff in 1988 to commemorate this dedicated doctor’s life.

Dr. Kate Pelham Newcomb overcame the obstacles in her life with perseverance and confidence. By following her dreams, she helped improve the lives of thousands of people in her community. Her dedication and accomplishments made her a hero to the people of northern Wisconsin.
Glossary

donate (v): to give money, materials, or time to a person or cause

embarrassed (adj): self-conscious or uncomfortable

graduate (v): to finish school or training and get an academic degree, like a high school diploma

grateful (adj): thankful

medical (adj): having to do with medicine or a doctor’s treatment

outhouse (n): a small building without running water that people use as a toilet

physician (n): a person trained to help heal or cure people; another name for a doctor

well (n): a place to get water; usually a hole dug deep in the ground

wood stove (n): a stove that is heated by burning wood