



The Alma Dea Morani Renaissance Women in Medicine Oral History Project

Deborah German, MD

Interview Summary and Chapter Summaries

Interview Summary

Dr. Deborah German is Vice President for Health Affairs, leading an emerging Academic Health Sciences Center at the University of Central Florida, where she is also Dean of the College of Medicine which she founded in 2006. Her leadership in medicine ranges across research, clinical, and educational missions. She was Associate Dean of Medical Education at both Duke and Vanderbilt Colleges of Medicine. After 13 years at Vanderbilt, Dr. German next served as President and Chief Executive Officer at Saint Thomas Hospital in Nashville. Her wide-ranging leadership experience and spirit of adventure have been integral to the establishment of Orlando's "Medical City" – a sophisticated medical treatment, research, and education hub anchored by the UCF College of Medicine. She was awarded the Alma Dea Morani Renaissance Woman in Medicine Award in 2014.

This five-hour interview takes place in five virtual sessions conducted between May 2022 and June 2022. Dr. German recounts humble beginnings as part of a close, extended Italian-immigrant family eager to embrace the many opportunities America offered them. She emphasizes that such beginnings taught her everyone has value and something to teach us; she notes how she put that lesson to good use as one of the few women at Harvard Medical School in 1972. She describes a system "not yet ready for her", but one she knew she could influence. She is candid about the importance of her roles as wife and mother as she navigated the early stages of her career: Resident in Medicine at the University of Rochester (1976) and Fellow in Rheumatic and Genetic Diseases at Duke University (1980). Her narrative illustrates a career driven less by ambition than a deep commitment to the multiple identities she carried and a strong desire to achieve excellence and make a difference, no matter the endeavor. She explains how those commitments and desires led her career to grow in unexpected ways – from researcher to clinical faculty to academic medical administration, first at Duke University and then for many years at Vanderbilt University. In 2002, she accepted a position as CEO of St. Thomas Hospital in Nashville. Undaunted by her lack of experience, she recounts how her unprivileged beginnings and her medical training have equipped her with the sure knowledge that she is someone who can "figure out" complex problems. It is this spirit of inquiry, she explains, that she most hopes to impart to the students she leads today as Dean of the University of Central



Florida College of Medicine. She also relates numerous setbacks and disappointments in her life – but she articulates them as gifts and opportunities, describing the ways they have opened onto experiences and adventures beyond what she could have dreamed. She conveys the realities she faced as a woman in medicine, but never bitterly. She imparts a sense of pragmatism, optimism, and generosity toward others. She goes on to talk about her current role, what she has learned about leadership, and the exciting new opportunity to fashion something that will outlast her: a premier medical school at the University of Central Florida and an ever-expanding “Medical City” encompassing a blend of private-public partnerships to advance medical treatment, research, and education.

Chapter Summaries

Interview Session 1: May 11, 2022

Chapter 0-A

Interview Identifier

[00:00:10]

p.1

Chapter 1

Stories from Childhood

[00:01:48]

p. 2

Dr. German sketches her early life as part of a large extended Italian American family in Rhode Island, outlining the discriminatory attitudes of the time [00:20:46]. She discusses her parents’ modest education and income, but emphasizes the important ways her family, particularly her mother, reinforced a sense of her unique worth and ability [00:09:02]. She recounts her family’s Catholic faith and her own openness to multiple faith traditions. She describes the ways both her faith and her upbringing reinforced a sense that everyone has value [00:11:42]. She narrates some of the early experiences that attracted her to a life in medicine [00:06:33], including a dramatic story about a childhood friend’s injury [00:17:22].

Chapter 2

The Gifts of Family and the Gifts of Failure

[00:23:32]

p. 11

In this chapter, Dr. German explains the “gifts” of navigating the world as a woman from an immigrant and unprivileged background: knowing the value of everyone [00:23:56], a sense that all things are possible [00:26:15], and the lessons that come from failure [00:30:13]. She tells several illustrative stories, including her circuitous route to making the varsity



cheerleading team [00:31:47 – 00:34:08] and the nonacceptance into Pembroke College that energized her performance at Boston University [00:34:32 – 00:36:56]. Discrimination, based on ethnicity, gender, and class, mark several of her stories; but a doctor that afforded her mother both dignity and respect cements her own desire to become a doctor [00:48:25 – 00:50:15]. The gripping tale of her entry into Harvard Medical School – her rejection of their offer and her reconsideration of that decision – end the chapter [00:50:30 – 00:55:33].

Interview Session 2: May 18, 2022

Chapter 0-B

Interview Identifier

[00:00:10]

p.25

Chapter 3

“Everyone was my teacher”: memories and visions of medical education

[00:00:45]

p. 26

Dr. German recounts her first impressions of Harvard Medical School [00:01:03 – 00:08:20]. She relates her growing awareness that she can move into the unknown without fear, telling a related story of a particularly unique exam set by a physiology professor [00:08:21 – 00:13:19]. She speaks about her student clinical experiences in an environment unprepared for women doctors, recounting the story of her first surgical case [00:13:21 – 00:18:28]. This unenthusiastic environment solidified her relationships with nurses and other health professionals; everyone became her teacher [00:18:43 – 00:21:05]. Her stories move fluidly from what she learned in her student days to her current efforts to implement her vision for medical education and practice [00:21:06]. A more recent talk given to nursing alumni is illustrative [00:22:14].

Chapter 4

“A system learning to accept me”: a woman at Harvard Medical School

[00:24:40]

p. 36

Dr. German explains her generous tolerance of the pejorative attitudes to women at Harvard Medical School, understanding that they were attitudes held by men of her grandfather’s traditional era [00:24:40 – 00:26:53]. She tells an illustrative story of a professor who commented on her appearance rather than her ability [00:26:56 – 00:28:56], but explains that she herself paid particular attention to her appearance to foster acceptance in an ambivalent environment [00:29:42 – 00:31:34]. She explains her patience with a system learning to accept her [00:33:40]. She assesses the situation for women in medicine today [00:35:36 – 00:39:42].



Chapter 5

Making Doctors: embedding professional aspirations in the rituals of training

[00:39:44]

p. 44

Dr. German contrasts the lackluster rituals of her medical education at Harvard – the disappointing first day [00:40:24], the lack of a white coat ceremony, the fearful Match Day [00:41:36 – 00:42:51], the medical graduation held after students had moved to their residencies [00:42:52 – 00:44:10] – with the attention she gives to the spiritual, mental, and professional development of medical students. She tells a riveting story of her revitalization of the Vanderbilt orientation and white coat ceremony, outlining the important values it imparts [00:44:43 – 00:54:04]. She describes the expansion of that ceremony into a “Dean’s Curriculum” she holds with University of Central Florida medical students across the pivotal moments of their medical education, including orientation , Match Day [00:56:20], and graduation [00:54:44].

Interview Session Number 3: June 1, 2022

Chapter 0-C

Interview Identifier

[00:00:10]; p.55

Chapter 6

Mother and Doctor: with integrity and a spirit of adventure

[00:00:51]

p. 56

Dr. German explains her choice to pursue a residency program in “patient-centered medicine” at the University of Rochester, where she and her husband (also an MD) had both matched [00:02:41]. Having children, she relates, was even more important to her than her career [00:04:57]. She explains the careful planning and sense of adventure that pregnancy during residency required. She recounts, against prevailing wisdom, her directness and honesty about future children as she interviewed for prospective fellowship positions [00:08:59 – 00:11:34]. She tells the story of delivering her first child, Laura, just prior to taking up a Fellowship at Duke University [00:17:41 – 00:20:46]. The steep, yet amazing, learning curve of residency is elaborated [00:22:38 – 00:23:48]. She explains the ongoing supportive role nurses played in her residency years and considers the possible gender based reasons for these relationships [00:25:43 – 00:29:38]. She offers her views on achieving “work-life balance”, noting it is possible but not all at one time [00:32:39]. She narrates the more difficult transition to two children with the birth of her second daughter, Julia [00:21:12]. A junior faculty member at Duke, she speaks of the deliberate decisions she made to prioritize her children at this stage of her career [00:36:06 – 00:38:49], relating a truly exceptional multi-tasking story as illustration [00:42:23]. The satisfaction of being both mother and doctor is illustrated in a tale of her young children’s assessment of her “fun job” [00:38:50].



Chapter 7

Wife and Doctor: “your greatest opportunities come in unknown packages”

[00:47:05]

p. 77

Dr. German explains her acceptance, given the couple’s traditional upbringings, of the primacy of her husband’s medical career [00:47:41]. She tells the story of giving up her faculty and administrative positions at Duke to follow her husband to a new opportunity in Nashville [00:49:02]. Narrating how your greatest opportunities come in unknown packages [00:52:07], she elaborates the initial position she negotiated at Vanderbilt medical school after her arrival in Nashville.

Chapter 8

Joys, sacrifices, priorities: what the profession of medicine gives and requires

[00:53:26]

p. 80

Dr. German elaborates on the joys she has experienced across research, practice, education, and administration [00:54:10 – 00:58:03]. She summarizes her advice to women in the profession, noting the need for setting priorities and making sacrifices for their diverse goals [00:59:23 – 01:01:07]. She also explains the ‘spirit of inquiry’ she wishes to foster in today’s doctors [01:04:00], offering current educational initiatives designed to inculcate that spirit at the College of Medicine, University of Central Florida where she is Dean [01:06:48; 01:08:05]. She mentions key mentors in her training days [01:11:25]. Reflecting on the ways women’s careers in medicine differed from men’s, she tells an evocative story about masking her pregnancy during her fellowship [01:13:27 – 01:15:32].

Interview Session Number 4: June 7, 2022

Chapter 0-D

Interview Identifier

[00:00:10]

p.91

Chapter 9

Mother Teresas, Nobel Laureates, Surgeons General: helping medical students reach their dreams

[00:01:01]

p. 92

Dr. German explains that her career path revolved around ‘doing things well’ rather than ascending the ranks [00:02:17]. She relates how the ‘spirit of inquiry’ that she inculcates in students was part of her own training and practice of medicine [00:07:20 – 00:10:15]. As



Associate Dean of Student Affairs at Vanderbilt School of Medicine, she began experimenting with curricular initiatives to this end, instituting a community health research program [00:11:17]. She speaks of the need to create medical school experiences that protect and foster students' dreams, narrating the three categories these come in: Mother Teresas, Nobel Laureates, and Surgeons General [00:13:40 – 00:15:28]. She set a high bar for students at Vanderbilt and won their allegiance and respect [00:16:11]. She tells a story of a Vanderbilt alumnus, now in Florida, who gives vibrant support to the UCF College of Medicine she now leads [00:18:20]. She elaborates how being a woman in medicine in the 1970s allowed her to observe medical education with new eyes and new ideas [00:21:19 – 00:23:47].

Chapter 10

“I just want you to know your career is over”: defining success for yourself
[00:26:14]

p. 102

In this chapter, Dr. German describes her initial position at Vanderbilt's School of Medicine and her movement through academic administration. She begins with the harrowing story of Vanderbilt's Vice-Chancellor for Health, a former Duke administrator, pronouncing her move into Student Affairs as the end of a once promising career [00:27:19]. The story turns when the Vice-Chancellor announces in his retirement speech his enduring respect for improved student satisfaction at Vanderbilt [00:32:00]. Dr. German expounds on this story to elaborate her own idea of “success” [00:33:55 – 00:35:43], the contributions she feels she's made to medicine [00:35:46], and the importance of diversity to the profession [00:37:09].

Chapter 11

“A disaster is really an adventure in disguise”: CEO of St. Thomas Hospital, Nashville
[00:38:37]

p. 107

Dr. German elaborates the personal and professional circumstances that prompted her to leave Vanderbilt and accept the position of CEO and President of St. Thomas Hospital in Nashville. Various stories illustrate her lack of preparation for this position. She explains how leaping into the unknown marks her earliest forays in the profession and is consistent with her willingness to make choices that require courage [00:46:26 – 00:49:28]. She describes what she gained from this new adventure. A story of a Vanderbilt colleague's incredulity illustrates how she gained respect from quarters she didn't know it was absent from [00:49:45]. More fundamentally, she explains the position offered her exposure to a wide range of new problems and the adventure of solving them [00:51:03]. Her ability to learn from everyone is illustrated by the exciting stories of her collaborative and successful endeavors to resolve a fiscal crisis [00:52:58 – 01:02:10] and improve patient satisfaction [01:03:50 – 01:06:36]. She concludes the chapter with the dispiriting story of departing St. Thomas, a move precipitated by a system once again not yet ready for a woman leader who thinks outside the box [01:10:44 – 01:13:43]. Characteristically, she frames this disaster, as



others, as “an adventure in disguise” [01:16:10], an opening to new and unexpected opportunities.

Interview Session Number 5: June 10, 2022

Chapter 0-E

Interview Identifier: Session 5

[00:00:10]

p. 123

Chapter 12

No fear of failure: Founding Dean of the University of Central Florida College of Medicine

[00:00:51]

p124

Dr. German explains that for the first time in her career she is free of familial responsibilities and able to ask herself “what do I want to do next?” [00:01:35] A one-year Petersdorf Scholarship at the Association of American Medical Colleges allowed her to research, reflect, and explore leadership possibilities [00:03:56]. She recounts several new job options, explaining why the project of launching a new medical school as the anchor tenant in an as-yet unfilled 7000 acre “medical city” held such tremendous appeal [00:06:16]. She tells the story of the search that almost failed, leaving her as the one candidate courageous enough to accept the position [00:08:39 – 00:10:32], a story she notes as important for women. She recounts the frenetic pace required to prepare an accreditation submission and the collaborative and diverse consortium that made that happen [00:11:21 – 00:16:45]. A comparable story illustrates the preparation of a temporary space to house the incoming medical students [00:16:53 – 00:20:23].

Chapter 13

“Structure predicts function”: building a new medical school

[00:21:38]

p. 132

Dr. German describes the importance of the design of the brand-new building that would eventually be the UCF College of Medicine, elaborating the importance of space to function and values [00:27:21]. She offers the design of the Anatomy Lab as illustrative [00:22:54 – 00:24:58]. She recounts the firing of the first architectural firm [00:25:12], the awards garnered by the second firm [00:26:52], and her own enduring commitment to shepherding the right spaces for her vision. She reflects on the connections women’s lives may have to spatial understanding [00:29:09].



Chapter 14

The Medical City: what women need to know about pursuing excellence

[00:31:21]

p. 137

Dr. German elaborates on the College of Medicine’s relationship to the hub of research, practice, and industry initiatives that comprise the ‘Medical City’ and her role in fostering productive partnerships. She describes the advantageous position she held as the sole recruit willing to take on this project and how she used it to ensure excellence in her endeavors, a lesson she notes as important for women to know [00:36:01]. She shares anecdotes about the securing of a VA hospital partnership [00:37:53 – 00:39:02] and the amalgamation of UCF’s existing biomedical sciences college into the College of Medicine [00:39:16 – 00:42:30].

Chapter 15

“An offer they can’t refuse”: entrepreneurship and the new medical city’s Cancer Center

[00:43:22]

p. 143

In this chapter, Dr. German acknowledges her uniqueness (oft remarked upon) as a medical dean who creates unusual public-private partnerships [00:44:20]. She tells the story of establishing a collaborative venture for cancer research and treatment and securing a building (against all odds) for that endeavor [00:45:46 – 00:53:05], illustrating her entrepreneurial spirit and her refusal to accept ‘no’ as an answer [00:53:57].

Chapter 16

Thoughts on Leadership

[00:54:57]

p. 148

Dr. German describes her growing responsibilities at UCF, leading to her new title, Vice President for Health Affairs. She recounts her understanding of the several levels of leadership [00:57:01], and her affinity for “leading up” to one’s boss and “leading out” to the community [00:58:09]. She offers the anecdote of raising money for scholarships for the charter class of medical students as an example of both [00:59:09 – 01:03:20]. She speaks to the challenges of leading through Covid-19 [01:04:25], stressing the importance of leaders avoiding micromanaging and allowing the greatness in everyone to emerge [01:06:48 – 01:08:13].

Chapter 17

Looking forward, looking backward: final reflections

[01:08:54]

p. 154

Asked to reflect, Dr. German outlines the priorities for medicine’s future and denotes the broader changes in education she believes necessary for a flourishing society [01:10:10 –



01:13:45]. She elaborates the activities that replenish and sustain her commitments [01:14:53]. She updates the current status of her now adult children, introduces her grandson, and shares her pride in their accomplishments [01:17:46]. The chapter ends with Dr. German's appraisal of a poem, *If* by Rudyard Kipling, that she has drawn on from childhood to today.



Interview Session: 5
Interview Date: June 10, 2022