

## Dalal Aziz: Resident Surgeon

*(Born in 1972, in Saida [Sidon]; originally from Neeha [Shouf]; currently living in Beirut. Recorded in her house. Language: colloquial/educated Arabic.)*

Shall I start from the beginning family-wise? I'm the oldest child and I'm from Saida. I have two sisters. I don't remember my childhood. My mother tells me that I was very quiet and calm. From an early age I was bright and did well in school. I guess this is what was special about me. I was always first in class and in the entire school. I was always chosen to represent the school in competitions against other schools. My childhood wasn't remarkable. I remember that I was rather introverted and not very sociable.

When Israel invaded Lebanon [1982], we left Saida for the mountains to escape the war. I attended the 'Lycee' there. Nothing special happened, I concentrated on my studies and eventually graduated from school with a Bac. II in 'mathelem'.<sup>1</sup> At school my whole life was spent on studying but I also liked gymnastics. I used to read a lot. My dream was to enter university, but I had no idea what to specialize in. Everyone used to tell me that I should do medicine and become a surgeon. But, when it was time to go to university, I still hadn't made up my mind. I was very confused, that's why I chose the 'mathelem' section in school so as to be able to study anything I wanted in university. I always liked doing difficult things so I applied to both the Engineering and Biology departments. I was accepted by both Engineering and Chemistry. When I had to choose I asked my father for advice. He recommended I should take chemistry because it would enable me to do medicine later on. According to him, a degree in medicine was better than one in engineering. So I took his advice and studied chemistry. When I first got accepted I hadn't decided finally to be a doctor. I started off with chemistry but later shifted to Biology because by then I wanted to be able to continue in medicine. I did well in my BS degree. At university I still concentrated mainly on my studies but after entering medical school I realized that there are other things in life to explore. That's when I started giving more time to myself. I traveled a lot during vacations and started going out more often. During my fourth year in medical school I

had to choose a specialization. To be honest, I felt lost, I didn't have the faintest idea what to specialize in. Surgery crossed my mind but I dismissed it because all my teachers and colleagues discouraged me. Yet after much thought I applied for surgery because there was nothing else I wanted to do. I told my parents and warned them that I might never find work, because people here can't conceive of going to a woman surgeon. I received a lot of encouragement from my father, who suggested that I do obstetrics and gynecology, but I didn't want to. At first I didn't tell my colleagues that I was applying to do surgery, only a very few close friends knew. Then the word spread in the hospital, and when people knew about it they were shocked. Everyone tried to dissuade me, telling me that I wouldn't be able to find work once I graduated, and that I was ruining my career. Everyone asked me, "What are you trying to prove?" They knew I was competitive but, according to them, I should think more about my future, and potential family life. I took no notice of them because I really like this field, I felt that it suits me, though of course it's tiring. I don't know what may happen but I hope all goes well. (pause)

Myriam: What more can you tell me?

Dalal: I think the reason you're interviewing me is because I'm doing something special, because I'm a surgeon. What I have to say is that my life before the third year in medical school was very monotonous. I focused only on my studies. I was a successful student and this was rewarding, but that was all. I can tell you about some people, some friends who influenced my life. For example, I had a friend called Bishara. We were both chemistry students at the beginning. From the first day in university we used to compete to see who would get the best grade. We'd wait impatiently to see who was doing better. When I shifted to biology, he prayed that I would stay there so that he would be first in chemistry, with nobody to compete with. Afterwards, we became real friends and worked on projects together.

My closest friends today are people I used to work with in class. In anatomy courses, we used to have bodies to do autopsies on. We were seven or eight students working together and we became friends. We worked on projects concerning organ transplant together. We went and asked people about their perceptions of organ transplant. We also went to religious officials to find out their opinions. We worked on several other projects together, and made presentations on them. It was very enjoyable. Bishara is in America today doing family medicine, and we've stayed in contact through e-mail. He is doing very well there. He was one of the first to encourage me to do surgery. He used to tell me that I should specialize in the field that





I was really interested in. When he chose to do family medicine, all of us were surprised because he was an excellent student, and family medicine is considered a very easy specialization in Lebanon. But he was convinced. Now, he is doing so well in this field that the program director has promised him that once he graduates, he will become an 'attending'. The point is that when you really like your work you are likely to excel in it. Nowadays, doctors here are being encouraged to apply for family medicine whereas before they avoided it.

Myriam: Tell me more about the 'war atmosphere'?

Dalal: You may be surprised, but I enjoyed the 'war atmosphere'. (laughs) We were in the mountains and the village was not affected by the war, it wasn't shelled or bombed. I didn't experience the terror of being attacked at any moment. We didn't feel threatened because Neeha is very high up and we were never really targeted. We lived the war atmosphere but were not directly affected. Only once Israel bombarded our area, but it was far from where we were and there was never any real threat. In fact I was excited by the war and wanted to learn to shoot. I loved the idea of being in a battle. I used to nag my father to teach me how to shoot. I even wanted, if I had been older, to join in the war. I wasn't really feeling the danger, I only sensed the excitement. People kept coming and going and there was always news, I kept aware of what was happening.

Myriam: What about your family?

Dalal: About my parents, my mother is strict, while my father is cool and relaxed. My mother remained strict with me until I went to university. At university I matured, and so my mother trusted me more. At first when I wanted to do anything or go out, I used to tell her. Then she changed, and I had more freedom. I didn't have to report to her any more. Yet I still tell my parents about my plans, though now I have the freedom to decide for myself. Now I have a holiday coming up and I've decided to go to France with my friends. This was something my parents would never have accepted before I went to university, because they are conservative. They couldn't conceive of a girl traveling on her own. Now I still tell them my plans and take their approval, but I feel I'm the one who decides. But family is very important for me and my family is very supportive. I still rely on them for a lot of things. My schedule is very hectic - I work one day on, one day off. This means I have to sleep in the hospital. I can't leave my work even for a minute. Most of the time I don't have time to do my own paper work at the Ministry of Education. It's usually my parents who help me, or my sisters. I have two sisters, I'm the oldest. One sister is in her last year of university doing midwifery, and the other is in her first year, she is specializing in tourism. I rely on them a lot because I'm so busy. I don't like this, but I don't have a choice, especially now that I'm in open-heart surgery. There's not a single day during the week in which I am free. If I'm free it's at weekends when all government offices are closed. For example, I'm going to France on holiday and it was my father who applied for my visa. My parents are very supportive, and I rely on them a lot. My sisters and I are their top priority, and I feel that they live

for us. I also love my sisters and appreciate them. (pause)

Myriam: What else do you remember?

Dalal: I used to believe that my graduation day would be a very special day, that I would feel different afterwards. I graduated with my BS, and then from medical school, and discovered that it isn't true. Because at each stage in my life, I was thinking about the next step.

I learned to depend on myself when I traveled without my family. The first time was when I traveled to Egypt, where I had an exam to complete, with my friends. We did some tourism, we stayed together, and never took a taxi unless we had a guy with us. Once on this trip we were shopping at a hotel - I love buying clothes - I left my friends to buy something I'd seen before. I didn't tell them I was going because the shop was close, and I expected them to stay in the same place. When I got back, I didn't find them, they had gone. I searched for them everywhere in the hotel. It was the first time I had traveled, and I wasn't used to being alone. I went back to the shop and told the salesman I was lost, and asked him for advice. He told me about nearby places to visit. I went and visited them, and then went to the restaurant where we had previously agreed to have lunch. My friends were there. This was a small incident, but those two or three hours I spent on my own were very important. They gave me self-confidence. Another time there was an exam in Greece. Again we were a group of students. Most of them had to come back early, except two girl friends and me, we could stay longer. So we decided to stay for three more days on our own. Until today we remember those three days as one of the best times in our lives. I remember I bought a statuette of Hippocrates. None of my friends wanted to buy it because it reminded them of medical school, but I liked it a lot because words were engraved on it, and it was old and attractive. I bought it and carried it with me all day long because I had nowhere to put it. At the end of the day, while we were waiting for the bus, it fell on the ground and got broken. I was very angry. Then when I came back to Lebanon, my father mended it for me and now it looks fine, even better because it seems older now.

My life is a very ordinary one. The most dramatic moment was when I applied for surgery. It was difficult since many people were pestering me and asking, "What do you think you are doing?" and "What are you trying to prove?" Today, very few people do this. None of my professors told me not to go into surgery, but they all advised me to choose something else. I was the only girl who entered surgery. Now there is another woman applying to do surgery. She's still an intern. She's planning to specialize in ear, nose and throat. I'm usually not so talkative. (laughs)

The atmosphere in medical school and at the hospital isn't agreeable. All around me people complain and regret that they did medicine. I'm not the type to complain and I don't regret doing medicine, even though it's very tiring, and up to now it's not rewarding. We still don't earn salaries, and we still need time before we graduate. By then we will be around thirty five



years old. A big chunk of our life will be gone. And in the end you may or may not be successful. The atmosphere in the medical school is very stressful because there is a lot of competition. You have to strive to get the best grades, otherwise you'd be out of medical school, or you won't reach the position you really want. Plus there are no guarantees. There is always competition and there always will be, as each year there is selection. This never stops. The stress is there all the time. The surgery specialization has a pyramidal system where each year



Picture Credit: Mona Eid

the weaker students are weeded out. This competition creates tension between colleagues because you always perceive your classmates as competitors. This means there are a lot of groups. I have my own group where there isn't tension. We go out together. I don't perceive them as rivals.

Last month, I was in Emergency on twenty four hour duty. Some days I don't even have time to eat because there's so much work in Emergency and nobody to cover for me. So I can't leave. When you are off, you have to sleep. You can't do anything else because you are so tired. In the American University Hospital (AUH), professors are 'attendings' and patients are admitted under their name. But, in practice,

we take care of the patients, and in addition we have to make sure to follow instructions so that the attending doctors are satisfied. Sometimes, we feel we are learning things, and it's rewarding. Other times, we are just executing orders and doing the dumb work, which is annoying. So there are good and bad sides to it, but the important thing is the ability to be flexible. This I learned from life. I used to be very rigid and strict. But then I realized I would never get along with people and friends if I stayed this way. So I became more flexible. Now I'm happy with my life in the hospital. Most people around me grumble that it's tiring and there is no reward. Though it's true, I'm happy with it, maybe because I feel I am doing something I really like and it is worth it.

It's difficult to imagine how my life will be in the future, though I often try to visualize it. Like all young women I believe that eventually I should have a family of my own to stabilize my life and feel secure. But children would have to come later, after my residency period, because the way I work now I couldn't have

children. I'd like to have a family and settle, it would be difficult, but I think it should be possible. The most important thing is to find someone who understands you. What I think about most is my career, and how to succeed as a surgeon who is a woman. I think about this a lot, it won't be easy. I wonder, after I have graduated in surgery, shall I have patients? Many people tell me, "You may graduate but no patient will put his life in your hands." That's what most people around me say, that they will never trust their life to a woman surgeon. I'm used to this kind of talk and it no longer affects me. I'd like to go to America and do a fellowship there. It would give me more confidence in myself. I could start off in the States and eventually come back and work in Lebanon. People won't accept a woman surgeon immediately, it will take time. I know that I have taken a risk in my choice of specialization. I might be exhausting myself for nothing, who knows? (pause)

Do you want me to tell you about myself? Even though I'm Druze and proud of being one, I go to church, I go to Harissa and pray there. I believe in all the gods. I'm very sensitive. For instance if I watch a film that has a touching scene I start to cry. As you notice, my voice is soft, when people see me they tell me I should have done pediatrics (smiles). I am very shy, I blush easily, I cry easily. But I'm doing surgery, and when I see blood in the operating room it doesn't affect me. I enjoy cutting, sewing, these things don't affect me. When I look at male colleagues who are surgeons, they don't all have exceptional personalities. Some are very qualified, some aren't very qualified. It's a profession that requires persistence mainly. (pause).

Another thing about myself is that I'd like to travel round the world and meet new people. Two months ago I had 'rotation' in the Maqassad, and met two medical students doing their elective there, one from France - originally from Algeria but now she's living in France - and the man was French. We asked them what brought them to Lebanon, why would two French medical students want to do their elective in Lebanon? The man told us that while visiting Turkey on a vacation he met some Lebanese and liked them, so he thought of visiting Lebanon. We befriended them and went out with them several times. One thing you won't find in the Lebanese is their simplicity, they were very spontaneous and simple. They say what comes into their heads. There're not pretentious. If something is expensive they admit that they can't afford it, unlike us. What I liked was their spontaneity and simplicity. These qualities which you often find in foreigners attract me. During my time at the Maqassad I realized that the 'attendings' accepted me as a surgeon more than they do at AUH. I used to go into the operating room and they would hand over the case to me from start to finish.

Recorded and translated by Myriam Sfeir

## End Notes

1. Bac II in 'mathelem' is a high school leaving certificate with emphasis on mathematics and physics.