



## Editorial

## Confessions of a feminist who was mentored by men



I was born in January of 1950, a time when girls were expected to marry well but not pursue careers. Despite that, four men molded me into a career woman and feminist. I confess this despite the fact that I have penned many articles regarding the importance of women as mentors and women's equal rights (DeWane and Grant-Kels, 2020; Grant-Kels, 2015a; 2015b; 2016; 2017; 2018a; 2018b; 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2021a; 2021b).

A recently retracted publication from *Nature Communications* argued against female same-gender mentor–mentee relationships in science (Alshelbi et al., 2020). These authors suggested that those who were mentored by women had less success in their future careers than those mentored by men. The reflex feminist in me was offended, and with a group of colleagues we undertook a survey and then submitted a manuscript contradicting the conclusions of the authors (Lin et al., 2021). Meanwhile, I have been guarding a secret: In my life, only men have mentored me. I now want to set the record straight.

How have I earned the badge of feminist? Writing profeminist articles alone does not make me a feminist. I am a feminist because I have survived and even thrived despite being regarded as inferior because I am a woman. For example, I was asked at my medical school interview whether I planned to get married and have children. My response to this query was to inquire of the interviewee whether he was married and had children and why would he think my aspirations would be different than his. Additionally, I was told, while pregnant, during a discussion with my fellowship director that women who have children are of no use to him or academic medicine, and how dare I get pregnant on him. My response to my fellowship director was that I unequivocally did not get pregnant on him! There are countless other examples I could share, but suffice it to say that these reflect what most women of my age have endured. Surviving these assaults, becoming successful and not bitter despite them, I believe have earned me the right to call myself a feminist.

Despite this history, it is time for me to set the record straight and confess that my life and career have been molded by four men. Although I had a strong, loving mother and have a resilient, successful, and independent daughter, it was these men who nurtured me and gave me the courage to eventually become a department chair, professor in three departments, and founding co-editor-in-chief emeritus of this journal and to take on leadership roles in national dermatology organizations.

My first mentor and cheerleader was my dad, George Grant (called Daddy with great affection). While my mother advised me to marry well, my father whispered in my ear that I could be and do anything I wanted and that I should reach as high as I pos-

sibly could. This was radical advice in the 1950s! He was gentle, supportive, encouraging, and very proud of each and every accomplishment, allowing me to see a future that I thought as a child was unimaginable for a girl. When he died in 2006 of complications of Parkinson's disease, my son published a tribute to him that eloquently describes this special man (Kels, 2007).

My second and constant mentor is my husband, Barry Kels. We both graduated from single-sex colleges and met in medical school. Not being used to going to school with the opposite sex, at first our friendship was awkward. Over time, we became best friends and later lovers and partners for life. Although at first a bit of a chauvinist, he reversed his opinions and has been the wind beneath my wings for the last 50 years. He has been a 50–50 (truthfully, he did 60%) parent and house-chore partner and encouraged my career at every opportunity. A source of great joy to me was that he and my dad became best friends and had an enduring love for each other. Not only has Barry been my role model, he has been the role model for our son, who penned a piece about him (Kels, 2014), and a confidant to our daughter, Joanna.

My third mentor is my son, Charlie, who is the model for virtue ethics: He always does the right thing because it is the right thing to do, not because of the consequences or the rules. In fact, when asked as a child what he wanted to be when he grew up, he would respond: "A good man." Most little boys want to be cowboys or firemen, but our son wanted to be a good man, and a good man he has become. Despite attending an extremely prestigious Ivy League college and law school, Charlie joined the U.S. Air Force as a Judge Advocate General's officer because he wanted to serve his country. After many years of active duty, he is now in the reserves, works as a civilian attorney for the U.S. Army, and teaches law. These three jobs pay him a small portion of what he could earn as a corporate lawyer (jobs that he has been recruited for many times in the past). Although corporate law would be exciting, in his opinion the jobs he holds serve the better good. On top of three jobs, he is supportive to his wonderful academic psychiatrist wife, Lori Kels, and an amazing father to his four sons. Charlie is my role model of being a good person.

Finally, my fourth mentor is my eldest grandson, Grant. Grant is named for my dad (his full name is George Grant Kels), and he not only looks like my dad but also has my dad's mannerisms. He is also the only grandchild who knew and loved my mom. Although on the cusp of adolescence, he remains sensitive to the feelings of others, grounded, and sweet. He is the epitome of goodness, loyalty, and enduring love. Despite his youth and knowledge that my continuing to work reduces our time together, he supports what I

do and encourages this old lady to continue to try to contribute to medicine.

What is the bottom line of my story? Women make great mentors, but so do men. As a woman, the men in my life have sustained and fulfilled me. Select your mentors where you find them, and do not select or define them by their sex or age.

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