



Spring 2019

A Well-Balanced Life: Sharon Weinstein's Long Career of Service

By Lauren Johnson

Sharon Weinstein, MD '78, knew that she wanted to be a psychiatrist at the age of 10. She read Nancy Drew and The Hardy Boys, but also Scientific American and Freud's books on dreams. She idolized pioneering scientists like Marie Curie, wrote to Jonas Salk, and was thrilled when the discoverer of the first polio vaccine replied. "From early childhood, I have always been interested in how people live their lives," Weinstein said, "learning how they face challenges and overcome adversity to realize their dreams."

Curiosity served her well. The Massachusetts Psychiatric Society recently honored her with the 2018 Award for Outstanding Psychiatrist in Education for her multifaceted teaching and program development in child and adolescent psychiatry.

Weinstein expresses gratitude to those who gave her roots, her family and mentors. Growing up in Hartford, Conn., as the oldest of five, hers was a childhood of stories. "I used to listen to stories about my Jewish grandparents immigrating to the U.S. from Poland to escape pogroms and find freedom," she recalled. "They came here with little, starting with my grandfather having a pushcart, to establishing a grocery store where people would congregate to ask his advice and share their stories. I listened to family stories of courage and resilience, of my dad's bravery at Normandy on D-Day, and about my mom's dedication to her family."

Service and education were woven into the family's culture. "In Europe, my grandmothers were denied educational opportunities," Weinstein said. "We understood what a privilege education was." Her parents ensured their children engaged with a spectrum of subjects, in school as well as at home and in the community. Weinstein thrived with the multidisciplinary concept—it would in fact become a pillar of her professional focus. "I was fascinated by connections between mind, brain, body, and society," she said. "I think that was fostered by a range of life events in a large, multigenerational family."

In many ways, Weinstein is a product of her environment. Her psychiatry practice exists at the intersection of science and art and of the personal and environmental, where culture, spirituality, and medicine meet. These elements were embedded in her heritage and ignited by her coming of age against the backdrop of a shifting world. In the 1960s, Weinstein attended a "large public high school marked by cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity," and she began college in an era of political upheaval and social change, particularly for women. Some regarded Harvard's introduction of coeducational housing her sophomore year there as an unwelcome break with tradition. Women were gaining admission to medical schools in greater numbers, but at Yale, Weinstein remembers some female classmates being told they were "taking the place that a man could have, that they would have children and stop practicing medicine."

Weinstein challenged biases through evidence-based research—her approach since her first science fair project when she

was 12. In college, she disputed the belief that women should not hold key political positions because of “raging hormonal influences” by writing a thesis examining emotions throughout the menstrual cycle. In medical school, her thesis centered on gender differences in depression. “It was an exciting time,” she said. “The whole field of gender and female development was being studied, researched, and radically revised to the good.”

Weinstein volunteered at pregnancy counseling services in Boston and often accompanied women seeking legal abortions to clinics in New York, sometimes crossing picket lines. “I grew up seeing how important it is for a woman’s dignity and self-actualization to have the right to make choices about her own body,” she said.

Weinstein also recognized the connections between environment, biology, psychology, and development, and deepened her appreciation of knowing and treating the “whole person” at Yale School of Medicine. “Yale was renowned for excellence and an innovative, far-reaching curriculum, especially in psychiatry,” she said. “Outstanding faculty taught us a humanistic, compassionate approach to the doctor-patient relationship.”

Weinstein brought the multidisciplinary philosophy to her adult residency and child and adolescent residency at **McLean Hospital** in Belmont, Mass., and to the Boston Psychoanalytic Society and Institute (BPSI). She ultimately focused on work with children, adolescents, adults, and families, both in her private practice in Lexington, Mass., and in paying forward her family’s educational legacy through teaching at McLean and Harvard Medical School.

The Massachusetts Psychiatric Society award is the latest in Weinstein’s encyclopedic-résumé, which includes honors for leadership in clinical work, education, and advocacy. She is a Distinguished Life Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry; received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the New England Council of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (NECCAP); and has served several terms as NECCAP president. Over 30 years, she has organized 170 psychiatric conferences and taught thousands of Harvard Medical School students and psychiatric residents.

Looking forward, Weinstein is concerned about a critical shortage of child and adolescent psychiatrists. “Nearly one in five U.S. children has a mental, emotional, or behavioral disorder within a given year, and only about 20 percent receive care from a specialized mental health care provider,” she said. “We need more pediatric psychiatrists to meet these needs. It’s a dynamic and rewarding field. With significant advances in research and treatments, psychiatrists can partner with families and colleagues to advocate, help children build on their strengths, and create solid foundations for the future.”

Weinstein finds her work hopeful and embraces the optimism of change and possibilities. “Much of the power of intervention, through education, connection, social action, and multimodal evidence-based treatments is in being able to rewrite your narrative,” she said. “You can see your past through a different lens and rewrite your narrative for the future, knowing that the end of the story has not yet been written.”

As with her family, it all comes back to stories.