

Time Machine Interview: Elizabeth Blackwell

Elizabeth Blackwell, born in Britain and raised in America, was the first woman in the United States to earn a medical degree. She was a pioneer in promoting women in medicine in the United States, and continued her father's work as an abolitionist.

Her sister Emily became the third woman in the United States to earn a medical degree. Together, Elizabeth and Emily Blackwell founded the New York Infirmary for Women and Children, and trained nurses during the Civil War.

Executive Leadership newsletter: Welcome, Dr. Blackwell. What inspired you?

Blackwell: My father believed that every person should have unlimited opportunities to reach their potential, and my education propelled me toward higher learning. It is not easy to be a pioneer—but oh, it is fascinating! I would not trade one moment of it for all the riches in the world.

EL: Your father died deeply in debt, leaving a large family. This is why you and your sisters opened a school?

Blackwell: Yes, my sisters Anna, Marian and I opened The Cincinnati English and French Academy for Young Ladies, and charged for tuition, room and board.

EL: Later you began your quest for medical school?

Blackwell: The idea of winning a doctor's degree gradually assumed the aspect of a great moral struggle for me.

EL: You wanted to attend medical school in Philadelphia but were rejected there and all over explicitly because of your gender.

Blackwell: That is true, even though medicine is so broad a field that we need the cooperation of both men and women.

EL: You finally landed at medical school in upstate New York, and earned your degree in 1849. Today you are claimed both by Hobart and William Smith Colleges and by the State University of New York Upstate Medical University.

Blackwell: When the dean conferred my degree, he bowed.

EL: You knew Florence Nightingale?

Blackwell: We were close friends, and we talked about opening a hospital together. I owe her my awakening to the fact that sanitation is the supreme goal of medicine. Health is as much a part of medicine as disease.

EL: You were famously headstrong. Is that why you two never opened the hospital?

Blackwell: Men are rarely faulted as headstrong. I did establish a hospital in 1857, in New York, as well as a

medical school for women in London.

EL: Barriers against women remained?

Blackwell: They insisted that women train as nurses, not doctors. A wall of social and professional antagonism faced woman physicians, leaving us in painful loneliness, without support, respect or professional counsel.

Yet, everything accomplished or learned by one woman becomes the property of all women. And if society won't allow women's free development, then society must change. Decisions made by only half the population, men, will have to be revised as the other half, women, rise to responsibility.

EL: Then women will run things?

Blackwell: No. Women need not occupy first place, still less second place, but they need to have complete freedom to take their true place, whatever it may be.

EL: You faced many barriers against women and you overcame them. How?

Blackwell: None of us can know what we are capable of until we are tested.

Sources: About.com Education, Wikipedia.