



Taking Center Stage: Kellie Christenson

Even by College of Medicine standards, third-year medical student Kellie Christenson is pretty unique. She has always shown an interest in her unofficial specialty, rheumatoid arthritis, and been familiar with physicians and comfortable around them. She has also always been interested in helping people. Yet she had never considered becoming a doctor herself. She was a *theater* major. It wasn't until she was volunteering for some first-year medical students – helping educate them about arthritis – that Christenson decided she would give medicine a try.

Kellie Christenson was diagnosed with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis as a one-year-old. Incredible physical and medical challenges – and severe pain – are associated with this disease. Despite a condition many would consider to be a permanent setback, Christenson became involved in theater and performing arts in her hometown of Tucson, Arizona. “Theater is how I became comfortable with myself and my disability,” she explains. She participated in a theater group that included both disabled and non-disabled children and young adults. As a performer with “Third St. Kids” (now known as “Arts for All”) she took part in two International Abilympics.



Christenson has always been involved with the Arthritis Foundation as well, progressing from camper to counselor, and then volunteer. With her background in the theater, she frequently did public-speaking engagements for the Arthritis Foundation, as well as performed public service announcements.

After graduating from the University of Arizona with a degree in theater, Christenson traveled to Los Angeles to practice her craft. Once there, she immediately became involved with the local Arthritis Foundation. “It’s like home,” she says. As part of her involvement with the foundation, she agreed to speak with first-year medical students at the University of Southern California for a patient partners workshop where students learn about arthritis from someone who has it. Christenson relates that when the medical students took her history, she began to realize, “They weren’t so far ahead of me in knowledge and intelligence. I always thought doctors were just the amazing people who helped me function in life and gave me my independence. I never thought I could be that, although I admired them so much.”

After her experience with the USC first-year medical students, Christenson had the thought, “Maybe I’ll try this.” *This* being medical school.

Although Christenson was entering an exciting new phase of her life, the transition from

working actress to medical school candidate was not an easy one. She admits that Scripps College, in Los Angeles, "took a huge risk, a gamble, taking me into their program. I'm sure at the time they thought, 'We'll take her, but we don't know how well she'll do.'" Christenson entered their post-baccalaureate program as someone with no science background. In addition to working extremely hard at her coursework, Christenson says, she "wasn't ashamed of saying 'I really don't know much about this. Can I get some help?' I went in all the time and asked for help; I took advantage of everything. I'm very grateful Scripps took me in their post-bac program," she says.

When Christenson was first exploring post-baccalaureate and linkage programs, she came across a school in Philadelphia called MCP Hahnemann University and thought, "I've never heard of this place." A few years later, under the new name Drexel University College of Medicine, it would be the only medical school to which she applied. Using Scripps's linkage program with Drexel, she applied to the medical school in 2009. She says of her campus interview with Cheryl Hanau, M.D., "There's just no better person to sell Drexel. I knew after that interview, if they pick me, I will go in a heartbeat."

Now that Christenson is here, she acknowledges that medical school has its own set of unique challenges, particularly the "sheer, sheer energy it takes just to get through." She likens it to a marathon, explaining that you can fail or forget, but you have to finish. "It's all been quite a lot. I just think, whenever it gets really hard, 'Remember, Kellie, you were a theater major!' I'm very grateful to be here. I've found a way to be humbled by everything and amazed when I can learn it, and be competent enough to explain it to someone else, and pass my exams, and apply it in my clerkships."

Christenson is quick to point out Drexel's tradition of inclusivity, particularly that of Woman's Medical College. The school has "made a name for itself providing a medical education to groups of people not first and foremost welcomed: historically, people who had to push their way in. They had to really want it. Nobody would have welcomed women in if they hadn't fought for the right to be there." In addition to her physical disability and non-science background, Christenson was also an "older" student. "I worked in the mortgage industry for almost three years while I took math courses at a community college in preparation for a post-baccalaureate program and volunteered at a nearby hospital," she explains. She is well aware that she was not the traditional medical school candidate, and is proud that "Drexel is really, really good about carrying on that tradition." She elaborates, saying, "That's what I love about this school. [Its] history of inclusion is part of what makes it perfect for me."

Today, as a third-year medical student, Christenson serves on the school's admissions committee. She is very aware of how she has benefitted from Drexel's open-mindedness. Students with physical disabilities are rare in medical school, but she has found that everyone at Drexel has been great. "I have physical limitations due to my arthritis," she explains, "but I haven't had nearly as many issues or problems as I worried I might have going in." As a student interviewer, she now looks at other candidates and asks, "Will this person fit in our diverse family based on the whole package?"

On a happy note, Christenson recently got engaged to fellow third-year medical student Amadou N'Dow. She laughs saying she'll think about planning the wedding after her surgery rotation.