

A Tribute by Dr. James Wallis to his Mother, Dr. Lila Wallis

We are here today to celebrate the birthday of a remarkable woman who just happens to be my mother. On June 1, 1921, 95 years ago, Lila Amdurska was born in Grodno, Poland, the first child of Samuel and Basia

Over the next 18 years, she excelled in school, and met a cross-country skier named Ben during the prize ceremony for a race he'd won. Their plans for medical and engineering careers were interrupted in September, 1939 when the Germans attacked Poland and began World War 2. They spent the next 6 years trying to avoid incarceration – or worse – and somehow were able to get married in May, 1941. As the War ended, it became clear that the Russians were rounding up everyone who'd had the intelligence to go to school or own a business. So they skedaddled just hours ahead of the Russian soldiers, and eventually made it to Paris, France, where several of Lila's uncles were living. After some highly irregular financial transactions, they managed to get passage to New York where Lila's father had been living in exile during the war.

Once in New York, my parents had to redo their education since all the records of their European education had been destroyed. My mother got her American BA degree at Barnard, then went on to Columbia's College for Physicians and Surgeons to complete her MD degree. I have to mention at this point that she has told me on several occasions that she was accepted to Harvard Medical School, but couldn't go there because her husband and family would not have been able to leave New York. The reason she emphasized this point has something to do with her desire to remind me not to get too swelled-headed on the – very rare – occasions when I might have suggested that my medical education was better than hers!

While Lila was pursuing her medical degree, Ben struggled with 2 jobs and his courses at Columbia's school of Engineering. He was rescued and helped to receive his degree by Elmer Gaden, Professor of Chemical Engineering, incredibly bright and generous man, cementing the bond between his family and ours, resulting in the presence here today of the Honorable Barbara Gaden of Richmond, Virginia, his daughter, to help celebrate Lila's birthday.

Lila, meanwhile, became a resident at New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center in New York city, where she met two extra-ordinary physicians: Ralph and MaryAllen Engle with whom she worked and bonded. After I came along during Mom's residency – and Jeff – my brother – arrived 2 years later - the families children bonded as well, and I am grateful that Marilyn Engle, their daughter, was able to come here today for Mom's birthday.

During her early years of residency, my mother noticed that women physicians were being discriminated against by the American medical establishment. At one point, her Chief of Medicine offered her only half the pay he provided to her male counterpart Co-Chief Medical Resident, thereby triggering my mother's crusade for women's rights within the medical establishment and better healthcare for women patients in general, a crusade that has lasted over the next 6 decades of my mother's career in medicine. During that period, she has authored books and articles too numerous to count, founded and helped to found multiple women's Medical associations, and inspired many young women physicians and health care providers to continue to join this effort.

Incredibly, she still had time and energy to properly educate and manage her own children. I remember one session at the kitchen table during which she worked on my nascent understanding of chemistry. I was possibly 8 years old at the time. She took me through the sequence of alkane molecules – for those of you who don't know what these are, there will be a remedial class afterwards. The sequence culminated with the question: what is the structure of a C₆H₆ molecule? – which is the chemical formula for benzene. And I will never forget that triumphant “Ah-Hah!” moment when – after several hints, I finally figured out its ring configuration.

When Kathleen and I moved to California, we asked my parents repeatedly to come for an extended visit and help mold their grandchildren. Since my mother was still attending weekly grand rounds at Cornell and all her friends were in New York, my mother strongly resisted this notion principally because it was really hard for both of my parents to travel.

In any case, after nearly 75 years of marriage, Pop – after a protracted illness – passed last September in Florida, where my parents had been living. Since her grandchildren lived in California, my mother finally came to live here with us, so that she can inspire them as she inspired me, and countless other physicians and colleagues.

Kathleen and I and our children are all so glad to have her stay with us, and we are also so glad that all of you could come here today to help us celebrate her 95th birthday.

Thank you all for coming.