



1974 CONSERVATION OF NATURAL RESOURCES

## PAMELA PEEKE MD, MPH

Pamela Peeke never planned to become one of the most sought-after female physician speakers in the world, nor did she plan, for that matter, to become a doctor at all. And yet her impressive resume encompasses patient care, traditional and alternative medical research, and a skyrocketing prominence as a sort of medical celebrity. Her diverse career arc suggests that open-mindedness, as much as skill and foresight, can be a crucial component to success.



Peeke is an assistant professor of medicine at the University of Maryland; the chief medical correspondent and host of her own shows for Discovery Health TV; a *New York Times* best-selling author; a radio host; a celebrity blogger; team doctor to the NBA's Washington Wizards; and an expert commentator for *Oprah* and *The Today Show*. If she had to single out one moment that launched her on this path, she would point to an incident during her senior year at San Francisco's Lowell High School. Even today, Peeke attests, only half-joking, that it accounts for a large part of her career planning. It lasted about ten seconds.

"Some nice guy from the yearbook came up to me and said, 'Okay, so what do I put under your name? Everyone at Lowell is pre-something, so what are you?'" recalls Peeke. She didn't have a clue. "What do you like?" he pressed. Science, math, and people. "That sounds like a doctor," the classmate said. Peeke was game: "Okay, let's do that!" She never looked back.

Peeke has a name for her career philosophy: "leading with passion." This doesn't refer to being a leader, but rather to allowing inner passion to lead the way through life. To a Berkeley graduate this idea may seem like a cliché; to aspiring doctors, perhaps, overly facile. It certainly stands in stark opposition to what Peeke says she encountered frequently among classmates during her premed days at Cal. "I'd be sitting through organic chem, and they'd be like, 'Oh gosh, I've got to get into medical school immediately,'" Peeke says. "They've gotta do this, they've gotta do that—and they were missing the entire journey."

"It really is about putting together your own path, and never being afraid," she said. "At the end of the day, it's about uniquely customizing the journey, and in order to do that you need fearlessness and courage." Her tone, fearless and courageous in its own right, seems forged from years of practice.

At this stage, Peeke's advice speaks for itself. Since graduating from Cal with a B.S. in conservation and natural resources in 1974, and with a combined master's in public policy and public health in 1976, Peeke has continually welcomed opportunities and challenges without fear of failure or concern for the "right" way of doing things. To her, it's not been about thinking outside the box, but about ignoring the box altogether.

Peeke earned her medical degree from Michigan State University, and completed her internship and residency training in internal medicine at George Washington University. She spent six years in critical care and trauma, then secured a Pew Foundation fellowship for research on nutrition and metabolism at UC Davis. After completing this work, Peeke

was prepared to take a job as an assistant professor of medicine. But the predictable path was not for Peeke.

A chance meeting with a colleague in Washington, D.C., led her to the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, as a senior research scientist examining the relationship between the stress hormone cortisol and fat. While she was there, NIH made a surprising decision to create an office of alternative medicine. Peeke had little experience with alternative medicine, but a fortuitous seat at a panel next to the new director helped land her a gig as the office's first senior research fellow. Here, she was able to approach stress and fitness from a whole new angle—one where nutrition and physical activity were crucial and where the likes of shark cartilage and bee pollen warranted serious study. In 1990, she started work there as a traditional molecular biologist in her laboratory at the NIH Clinical Center, while continuing to approach her mind-body research across campus at the Office of Alternative Medicine. "I often felt like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," she recalls.

"By this time I became a real anomaly," she said. "I was a physician, a scientist, a woman, and this surprising expert in nutrition. In those days, no doctor was trained in nutrition!" In 1993, CNN came calling for an authoritative source. CNN continued to call, deeming her "one-stop shopping" because she could speak plainly about a wide range of medical topics. Next it was the evening news, then the morning shows. Then the Discovery Channel. "They didn't have to interview an RD [registered dietician], a doctor and a scientist. I was like rolled up in one so I became a real hit with everyone because I made their life easy," said Peeke. Her down-home sense of humor, exuberant personality, and jargon-free speech sealed the deal.

By now Peeke's personalized career path had become her calling card, a ticket through a series of increasingly expansive doors. Not long ago, the American College of Sports Medicine named Peeke the national spokesperson for its "Exercise IS Medicine" campaign. WebMD recently contracted with her as its first celebrity expert covering the holistic and healthy lifestyle space. The list grows every year. And in keeping with her brand as "the doc who walks the talk," Peeke is training for the Boston Marathon, to be followed by her first half Ironman.

While it seems she's landed a charmed career, Peeke has never been exempt from the hard work necessary to convert opportunity into success. "It didn't feel like a mountain of work because I live by the principle that if you're doing what you love passionately and fearlessly, you'll never work a day in your life," she said. "That's a critical element in mastering life's journey".

Written by: Nate Seltenrich | Photo by: Bethany Bandera