

A Success Story

Shannon C. Trotter, DO, FAAD, interviewed by Steven T. Chen, MD, MPH, FAAD

STEVEN T. CHEN, MD, MPH: This is Steven Chen from *Dialogues in Dermatology*. I am excited to be sitting here today in Columbus, Ohio, where we are hosting a joint Ohio Dermatological Association and Academy event, called the Career Launch Boot Camp, which is really geared toward senior residents, as well as junior faculty, or I shouldn't say that, senior residents and junior attending, in terms of tips, tricks, and basically survival mode for how to succeed as a new dermatologist in the field.—

--In doing so, we've been blessed with a bunch of wonderful speakers. And so I am excited to bring some of those conversations to all of you out there in podcast land. And so I'm excited now to be joined by Dr. Shannon Trotter, from Oakview Dermatology. Let me say that again. I'm excited to be joined by Dr. Shannon Trotter, from Oakview Dermatology. And she gave us a wonderful talk about how to be successful. And I'm excited to hear more from her, in more detail about some of the things that she told us in her talk.—

--So rather than give you her introduction, since I have her right here with me, let me just turn it over to Dr. Trotter, to see if she could tell us a little bit about her own career path and how she got to where she is now. Dr. Trotter?

SHANNON C. TROTTER, DO: Thank you, Dr. Chen. So again, I'm Dr. Shannon Trotter. My career path has definitely been one that's had ups and downs. But it's really taught me about how to define success for myself, which I think is the most important lesson anyone can learn. Success is a relative term. You have to find out things you value in life, both personal and professional, in order to really fulfill your definition of success. After I completed a fellowship in cutaneous oncology at Boston University, I was recruited back to come to Ohio to run the pigmented lesion clinic.—

--Very important to me, especially for location for a family, something I highly value. And I enjoyed running the pigmented lesion clinic, where I had aspirations of being in academia full-time, being an expert in melanoma, research, but unfortunately personal things made me take a different turn. My dad developed an illness, he wasn't doing well. And as a result, I actually moved my practice to be closer to him. So I had to put aside my definition of being successful and had to redefine that.—

--It led me to an area that's underserved in dermatology. It also led me to develop new skill sets in caring for my dad and balancing my work and my life. But it helped me redefine success and find meaning in serving my patients that didn't necessarily have any dermatologic care, but also provide time with my dad, which was very important to me. Over time, that evolved and I actually joined private practice, because we started to get busier and the hospital couldn't accommodate our needs.—

--And I also developed an interest in academics again on the side, where I was able to participate now in the dermatology residency program with Ohio Health. So overall, it showed me that success can be dynamic, it changes. You have to be open to it. And as long as you keep meaning and values the same that you believe along the way, you will continue to be successful in life.

STEVEN T. CHEN, MD, MPH: I think that's a wonderful sentiment in terms of thinking about what success really is and what it really means. One thing that struck me in terms of hearing your story, going from a fellowship at B.U., continuing onto an academic position, and really redefining what success means for you is that transition might be difficult for some listeners, or for you, or even for myself. How was that transition for you? Did it feel abrupt or was it kind of a gradual thing that just made sense over time? And I imagine it's probably different for other people, too?

SHANNON C. TROTTER, DO: It definitely was difficult. I think for anyone, when you have a mindset that this is the path you're going to take, you already have an idea of what things should be. But unfortunately, life often hands you things that surprise you along the way, and you realize you have to learn to adapt. I think historically, if you look at people that survive horrendous events in life, how do they get through it? They find meaning in that. And not that switching from academics to private practice or working at the hospital is horrendous, but it was a new shift.—

--And to figure out how do I make sense of that, I had to find that meaning. And when I looked at where I was and working with patients that didn't have any dermatologic care, and also the opportunity to spend time with my father, it rather became quite simple. It was like the light bulb came on. Where at first, yes, a lot of resistance, a lot of frustration, and a little bit of selfishness. This is where I wanted to be or what I thought I should be doing. And to completely change that really was a challenge for me, to really get on board with a new idea.—

--But in life, I've learned you don't really have choice sometimes. You need to get on board and what happens along the way can be astounding, or success finds you in another way.

STEVEN T. CHEN, MD, MPH: Absolutely. I love the way that you framed that, in terms of your mindset. Even though it's not exactly the same thing, it makes me think of that concept of growth mindset. It makes me think of that mindset of just being open to other opportunities and really jumping at other opportunities when they might present themselves, even if they weren't necessarily what you originally thought. Can I ask, what were your support structures? Who were the people or the things that really helped you through these difficult decisions at times?

SHANNON C. TROTTER, DO: My colleagues at Ohio State were very supportive. So my chair, Mark Bechtel, was very supportive. He knew how important my relationship with my dad was. And how it was sort of a death, if you will, for me to kind of shut the door on academics for the

time. And that being said, so was my father. I think he was reluctant to let me shift my career. I might have been a little, I would say maybe less likely to tell him how maybe disappointed I was with the shift in my career, because I didn't want him to feel like it was a burden to come and be with him.—

--Even though I struggled with that, I think that's human, when you think you're going to do something and all of a sudden, it's like, "Whoa, I need to put my interests aside for somebody else." Because I am somebody that wants to live without regret. And the one thing I would have regretted is not going to help him.

STEVEN T. CHEN, MD, MPH: Absolutely. Shifting gears a little bit, something that you said in your talk that I really found helpful for myself was the difference of reactive versus responsive, in terms of dealing with, the example used was with a potentially difficult patient. But I think that that can also be applied to a lot of other things in life, in terms of how do you respond or how do you react to things. And do you mind sharing with our listeners what that difference might look like and how that helps you on a daily basis?

SHANNON C. TROTTER, DO: I think we're human people. So we're full of emotion, it's one of the blessings we all have. Unfortunately, I think emotion can be very blinding and destructive though at times, too. Emotion is great, you have a wonderful event, you're joyful. You have something that's sad, you cry, you process that. But also things that kind of irritate us or upset us. And it's very easy as doctors, because we like to be in charge, we like to be right. And when we're challenged, we often can have an emotional reaction to it. We feel threatened, we feel undermined.—

--The example that I like to give is a patient who comes in that you might have been treating for a long period of time. You struggle to get them better. You feel like you've gone through the laundry list of items but yet, they still don't seem satisfied. I had a patient that came in with

seborrheic dermatitis, struggling to get better. Came back and said, "You know what, Doc? I tried tea tree oil. It's the perfect solution. Why didn't you recommend this? I'm not sure you know what you're doing." And immediately my response wanted to be more what I would say is reactive. I wanted to say, "Well, of course I know what I'm doing, I went to school. I know how to treat this. I've successfully treated seb derm how many times?" And I just wanted to show them I was right.—

--But instead, I chose to kind of sit back and let that process through me. And instead of reacting, I chose to do a response or I chose to respond. And with that, I'm more thoughtful and I'm more purposeful, while trying to have an impact. And so I said to the patient, "You know, that's a good point. Tea tree oil does work for some patients. If that has worked well for you, I think it's perfectly safe to continue. And if you don't feel like you need to come back in to be reevaluated at this time, I think that's okay. Just give me a call when you think you need me."—

--And you can see the difference in my response. I think that's valuable, no matter where you're at in life. That can be dealing with your husband, dealing with your partner, a coworker, dealing with your patient. Dealing with the turmoil of healthcare as it is now, when you're frustrated with insurance or prior auths. If you can have more of a response as opposed to a reaction, we can be much more productive.

STEVEN T. CHEN, MD, MPH: Absolutely. I think that that's such a great lesson for all of us who, I don't think there's anyone who is a practicing physician, be it dermatologist or not, who doesn't deal with a lot of those frustrations, both from patients but, as you said, from the medical system or just issues with family, issues with loved ones. And when I say issues, it doesn't have to be a big thing, it can be small things that just fester over time.—

--One thing that I really took away from your talk that I think was great was just the shifting, something that you've talked about, the shifting priorities over time. About how when you

finished fellowship, the priority really became location, because that was really about being close to your father. As opposed to academics at all costs. And it did end up being an academic position, but just thinking about how we define what is important to us and how we respond versus react to all of these stressors that are in our lives. Do you have any other tips that you would kind of distill down for our listeners, be it senior residents or junior attending? Any tips that you've had, that you've learned over the last few years of practice that you think really encapsulate the message that you would try to send?

SHANNON C. TROTTER, DO: What I would say is definitely success is your own personal definition. But also, keep in mind that success is not just professional. I think personally, you have to feel a sense of satisfaction because they overlap and they sort of trickle into each other. Many people think they're successful professionally, yet they struggle in other areas of life. So you wonder how successful are they truly? I do think you have to be open, as you mentioned earlier in my point, to adapting that flexibility, that your definition of success may change.—

--As I took care of my father, then I became a mother myself. And trying to figure out, well, what is success for me now? It's definitely different than when I first graduated medical school or went on to fellowship. So if you can be open to know that success can evolve over time, and sometimes life is going to handle you different situations, to be successful I think that's really the key to manage everything.

STEVEN T. CHEN, MD, MPH: I think that's such a great lesson to learn, too. And I think just sharing my own personal experience, too. My wife and I always laugh about this, too, because we met in college. And the things that we were so obsessed and upset about in college now are so inconsequential to us, now that we have two beautiful children, we have our own careers to worry about. But we go back and we think about that. And at the time, it made sense. At the

time, that was our priority. And those things just change over time. And it's okay for those things to change over time.—

--And it's okay that we obsessed about those things when we were younger. So I think that's also helpful, too, for me, is to look back at my own path and to realize that the path that I took is okay. And that it's not like I made a mistake anywhere along the way. It's not like I put emphasis on the wrong place, in the wrong spot. But that everyone will have a different priority at a different time in life and that's how you can be successful.—

--The last thing I wanted to potentially close on is actually the list of tips that you gave our residents, as well. Such as joining organized groups or organized medicine. In terms of finding a support network. Any other tangible things that you might share with our listeners?

SHANNON C. TROTTER, DO: I think all those are very important. And I would really emphasize the value of the support network and organized medicine. I think a lot of people just think, "Oh, it's just a club. It's a fraternity mentality." And I try to explain to them, no, there's actual people that care for you, that care for the profession. They care that you're successful. And they're working every day to give tools, whether they are tangible things you can go find online and a guide or a kit or a toolkit. Or they're actually working at the legislative level. They're doing different things to ensure that you have tools to acquire success.—

--And I would tell anyone, just keep in mind the definition is yours. And it may change over time. And you have to be open to that. And if you are open and learn to adapt and develop that meaning, you will be successful in your life. And don't compare. I think that's the one thing to end on. Everyone compares about, maybe their colleague that's in academics that now has these publications and this type of reputation that you want to get, that's maybe what you want at one time. But you also learn what you have, you work with what you've got. And then you may be in private practice or somewhere else. The comparison game can be dangerous.—

--Focus on yourself and your own sense of fulfillment and don't worry about others and if they even consider you successful. You're the one that's going to decide if you're successful or not. Don't give the power to anyone else.

STEVEN T. CHEN, MD, MPH: I think that's amazing advice. And I think that's a great place for us to end our discussion, unless there's anything else you want to share?

SHANNON C. TROTTER, DO: No, that's great.

STEVEN T. CHEN, MD, MPH: But thank you so much for being with us, Dr. Trotter, today at the event and, of course, via podcast on *Dialogues in Dermatology*. For all you listeners, please tune back next time for another episode of *Dialogues in Dermatology*, for some more tips and tricks for our junior attendings in dermatology, as well as our senior residents. Thanks again.