

## AspiringDocs.org Meet the Experts Podcast Transcript

### What's It Like To Be A Medical Student?

Dominique Arce, a third-year student at Meharry Medical College, describes her experience getting into medical school, along with the barriers she encountered, and goes into detail about what it's like for her to be there.

**Eric Weissman:** Thank you for joining us for the AAMC and AspiringDocs.org Podcast. I'm Eric Weissman, with the Association of American Medical Colleges. Today we're going to talk to Dominique Arce, a third year medical student at Meharry Medical College, who recently went through the process of selecting and applying to school so it's all still fresh in her mind. Dominique originally comes from Tampa, Florida and she's interested in a career that involves pediatrics.

Dominique, thank you for joining us.

**Dominique Arce:** Thank you for having me.

**Eric Weissman:** So let's begin with a very broad question, as a medical student why do you think it's important to increase diversity in medicine? What does it mean to you?

**Dominique Arce:** Well I think diversity in medicine kind of falls into several different categories. I think the first is the patient communication. I believe that a patient has that extra comfort level when they are speaking with someone that they feel can relate to their backgrounds. And so if you have someone of the same ethnicity, same background

or even just comes from the same area, it enhances the level of communication which is obviously very important when it comes to patient communication. Also, I believe that it is important to have different perspectives and different viewpoints as far as when it comes to medical research and I think that having minorities involved in the research process also can help come to some answers, and arrive at some solutions that may not be thought of from other backgrounds. So I think it's just important in various avenues.

**Eric Weissman:** As a medical student do you find that this is a topic that comes up among your peers in school or does the faculty talk about it? Is diversity in medicine a hot topic at medical schools?

**Dominique Arce:** I think it definitely is. I think now that we're seeing a shortage of, just physicians in general, and then also noticing that disparities in healthcare and the amount of minorities that are seeking healthcare versus the amount of minorities that are given healthcare, I think that it's definitely a very hot topic today in medical school.

**Eric Weissman:** Is it the focus of any classes you've taken or is it just something that people talk about?

**Dominique Arce:** I wouldn't say that it's necessarily a set topic. I think it does come up in the clinics more often than I would say in the basic sciences but it's definitely an issue that gets thrown around.

**Eric Weissman:** So let's talk a little bit about you – how did you make the decision to go into medicine? Was there a person or an event? Was there one big inspiration that got you into medical school?

**Dominique Arce:** Well I honestly can't remember a time when I didn't want to be a physician. My mom was a registered nurse and I spent a lot of time in the hospital with her and all of her friends were doctors and nurses, and so I had always felt comfortable in that atmosphere, and always wanted to be a part of the excitement of medicine.

**Eric Weissman:** Was there a friend of your mothers, a physician who you knew when you were younger who talked to you about it? Who served as a mentor for you?

**Dominique Arce:** Actually my pediatrician and my mom were very close friends and they worked together prior to him becoming my doctor and he served as a mentor, and I worked in his office, and he showed me other aspects of medicine that you don't necessarily see as a patient. And so he definitely served as a big inspiration and mentor to me.

**Eric Weissman:** That's interesting. How old were you when you worked in his office?

**Dominique Arce:** I started working in his office when I was 14.

**Eric Weissman:** Oh really, what kind of work did you do?

**Dominique Arce:** I would call patients to remind them of their appointments and sometimes depending on what was going on in the office, he

would let me come and shadow him during the day. I was also able to shadow some of the nurses and just see some of the aspect of different parts of the office.

**Eric Weissman:** How many years did you work there?

**Dominique Arce:** I worked there for two summers and then after that I branched out and worked in other medical offices, and also in the hospital to see what's the best fit for me.

**Eric Weissman:** That's really interesting, so do you think you really learnt a lot even at that young age and those early years?

**Dominique Arce:** I think he was able to show me the excitement like the personal connection that he had with his patients and all of the patients loved him, and the parents really trusted him, and I wanted to have that kind of interaction in my work.

**Eric Weissman:** When you actually applied to medical school, was that a big part of your application? Did you talk about that experience or do you think that experience played a role in helping you get into medical school?

**Dominique Arce:** It definitely was a part of my application as well as the other jobs that I've had in different hospitals, and he helped me in my application process, in figuring out which schools would be the best fit for me, in addition to my experiences at his office. It's partly why I'm considering a career in pediatrics.

**Eric Weissman:** Interesting, so how did you decide which schools were the right fit for you? What kind of things did you look at?

**Dominique Arce:** Well my first determining factor was I didn't want to be too far away from home because I knew that my family was a major part of my life. Second I really decided based on interview processes. A lot of people have different ideas on which schools they thought was good for me but I didn't really make that determination until I went and saw these schools.

**Eric Weissman:** When you were in undergraduate...were you a pre-med student?

**Dominique Arce:** Yes.

**Eric Weissman:** Did you have any other academic interests outside of medicine? Were there other things that you looked at or did you always know that it was going to be medicine.

**Dominique Arce:** I always knew it was going to be medicine. I'm definitely interested in other courses. I took a lot of humanities courses and other courses that were not related to medicine but science and medicine was always my major focus and major interest.

**Eric Weissman:** So given that sort of straight shot and certainty you had about what your career was going to be, did you feel that you ever ran into any barriers on the pathway to medical school?

**Dominique Arce:** There actually were a few barriers. I had a lot of support from my family and friends but when it came to my actual pre-med advisors, I actually had two, and both advisors discouraged me from going into medicine and told me that my grades weren't good enough or that I wasn't going to be able to make it and that I needed to think about other aspects of science or other careers I need to go into. And that hindered me from using that resource and I stopped using them and I had to find my way. It made that a little difficult but I did have support in other avenues that helped.

**Eric Weissman:** So talk about that a little bit, did you mean that the pre-health advisors at your school, you felt were not encouraging you or they thought your grades weren't helping you, did that inspire you to do better or were they wrong about your grades, what happened?

**Dominique Arce:** The first encounter I had was after my first semester in college. So I kind of took it as it's way too early to decide and that's when I decided I wasn't going back to that particular pre-med advisor and I actually didn't go back to an advisor until my senior year when I was really starting to apply and I needed letters of recommendation and I had to go to the office, and then at that point that advisor actually told me don't be surprised if you don't get in. Basically it's what I was told – and I took that as I'm going to prove you wrong, I know my grades are good enough, I know my application is strong and I got in.

**Eric Weissman:** Great! How about the MCAT? Was the MCAT a challenge for you? How did you study it for it? What were you thinking around the MCAT?

**Dominique Arce:** Well I'm more of an independent studier, so I went to Borders and got the MCAT materials and basically read through them, did some practice questions on my own, and went ahead and took it.

**Eric Weissman:** Were you stressed out over the MCAT exams?

**Dominique Arce:** Surprisingly I wasn't – and I think my lack of, I guess at that point, pre-med advising and knowing the seriousness of the test, inadvertently helped me because I wasn't so nervous and I wasn't thinking this is the end all tests. And I kind of went into it like, "I've studied, I've prepared, and it's like any other test."

**Eric Weissman:** Nice. What was the medical school interview process like for you? Now that you've been through it and have had the experience, what advice would you give to a student who hasn't yet interviewed for medical school?

**Dominique Arce:** Well I think every school that I interviewed at, was a completely different vibe or atmosphere. Some of them had group interviews, some had individual interviews back to back, some are more casual and I think that my advice for the interview process is, if possible try to find a contact at that school that can give you some insight on not what's going to happen during the day, but insight on the school itself and how they operate. And just so you can be a little more comfortable when you get there. And I routinely went

to my interviews the day before so that I can walk around the campus and get a feel for the school, and talk to the people and be comfortable not arriving there on the day of the interview for the first time. Also, I think it's very important to be yourself, and I think that's how I was able to figure out which schools were the right match for me just by being myself and knowing which school my personality and my way of thinking kind of fit.

**Eric Weissman:** So in other words it wasn't just you being interviewed by people in the school. You were interviewing the school, you were looking for the right school for you.

**Dominique Arce:** That's definitely how I looked at it. I figured if I was getting an interview, I had met the minimum requirements and they wanted to see if they liked me and I needed to see if I liked them. So I made sure that I researched the school, I had questions when I got there so that I knew if we were going to meet my personal needs and if I would be a good fit for that school as well.

**Eric Weissman:** Are you someone who normally would have been nervous in a situation like that? I get this feeling I have a picture of you being confident walking into those interviews.

**Dominique Arce:** I can say my first interview, I was terrified. I was so badly wanting to get in and wanting to succeed that I overshot myself and got really nervous. But after that first one, I just told myself you know, what's going to happen is going to happen, what's best for me is

what's best for me so I need to be myself and relax, and after that it was a lot easier. But the first one was a little nerve racking.

**Eric Weissman:** It was the practice one.

**Dominique Arce:** Right, and so if someone is able to determine which schools they are able to interview at first, I would try to interview at a school that maybe isn't necessarily at the top of your list at that time. So, just in case you do have that nervousness and you aren't able to perform to the top of your ability, you won't be as devastated because unfortunately, at the time when it was my first choice that I went to. And that kind of made me nervous.

**Eric Weissman:** Right, you changed your mind for the process?

**Dominique Arce:** I did change my mind. I ultimately did get into that school but I did change my mind and realized that what I was looking for in a school wasn't necessarily the glitz and glamour, and all the high technology and everything. I needed a school that was more like a family atmosphere.

**Eric Weissman:** And that was something that you feel you learned during the interview process?

**Dominique Arce:** Yes. The size of the class and how the other students that we met were interacting with each other really determined which school I wanted to be at.

**Eric Weissman:** So now that you're there, now that you're in medical school what's it like? What's it like academically? What's it like socially? Tell us a little about the experience?

**Dominique Arce:** It's a balance. Everything has to be a balance. Your life before medical school is completely different than your life during medical school. You have to take time away from your social activities and put them more into your studies and school requirements and it takes awhile to get used to at first especially when you have friends from back home that are going on trips, or that want you to hang out with them, and you can't always accommodate them. You have to be really disciplined in balancing your time. But on the flip side of that, the friendships and the bonds that you build in medical school are unlike any other. There are different from any other friendship that I've ever made in the past.

**Eric Weissman:** How so?

**Dominique Arce:** I think just the common stress and common situations that we're all going through everything for the first time together, the friendships that you build not only happen very quick but the strength of those friendships develop very quick. You end up relying on people in ways you aren't used to relying on people before. And I think it's definitely friendships that will last.

**Eric Weissman:** So you feel like you've really connected with these people?

**Dominique Arce:** Yes, it's unlike any social friendship that I've had. It's a social; it's a work; and it's just having those common situations. You're always together.

**Eric Weissman:** Yes, that gets to another question I have, so generally do you really identify with your classmates; do you feel like you're spending a lot of time with them and really learning things from them and connecting with them? It's a particularly rich experience in that regard?

**Dominique Arce:** I think if you pick the right school and really focus on what's right for you, you'll have everything you need and that does include a rich, strong bond with your classmates and I wouldn't trade it for anything.

**Eric Weissman:** Have you had any surprises or things you weren't prepared for that just made you think, wow, this is more than I expected?

**Dominique Arce:** I wouldn't say necessarily surprises. But I knew that I was going to have a lot of time away from my family but I think the extent to which it affects you, was surprising not being to go home every holiday or not being able to go on spring break vacation with your family or just little things that you may have taken for granted with your prior school schedules. I think the surprise was how difficult it was to get used to. So no matter how much you prepare for medical school there's always going to be something that is going to hit you the last minute that you weren't prepared for.

**Eric Weissman:** Any positive surprises? Anything that you thought was going to be difficult and it turned out not to be or something that you discovered or learned about yourself that has reshaped how you think about anything?

**Dominique Arce:** Well, let's see, Biochemistry?

**Eric Weissman:** You conquered Biochemistry?

**Dominique Arce:** I think that was the class that definitely scared me the most. I didn't take it in undergrad and I thought that was going to be just the worst decision that I ever made and then I got there and had the most amazing biochemistry professor and he just held my hand and helped me get through every aspect of the class and that brings me to another issue – and it's just the professors, I thought they were going to be very rigid, strict, the professors in my school I can speak for are very much like my family now. They have an open door policy, I can walk into their office at anytime, if I have a problem, school related or not school related it doesn't matter and I think that was very surprising.

**Eric Weissman:** It sounds like between your classmates and faculty that you've found an incredible support network?

**Dominique Arce:** Yes. It's definitely like a family. I feel like it's just a huge extended family.

**Eric Weissman:** What's the one thing you want people to know about a career in medicine given your experience thus far as a third year student?

**Dominique Arce:** I think one thing that I didn't realize at first is how incredibly diverse the field of medicine is. There's really something for everyone. There are opportunities in bench research, clinical research, in clinics, in hospital settings, whatever is the best fit for you, you can tailor a career in medicine to your lifestyle and I think that was why I expected it to be 24 hours, everyday, all the time. And it doesn't have to be that way, you can pick and choose what time of your life you want to do research, what time in your life you want to be in the clinic, what time in your life you want to be on call or you don't want to be on call, it offers a lot of opportunities and it's very dynamic and it can change as your life changes.

**Eric Weissman:** Well Dominique thank you very much for joining us.

**Dominique Arce:** Thank you very much for having me.