

## SASA Wellness – My Story: Dr Caroline Lee – Wellness Team

My parents worked for the Diplomatic Corps of Taiwan, so I spent my life travelling from the tender age of 4. It was a life full of excitement, changes, upheavals and adaptation. But what I remember most from my childhood was a family full of love and each other. My father was posted in Central and West Africa at the time it was going through major political changes. He had to steer our embassy and our family through three coup d'états, some through gunfire and military take overs, and one which we were given "three days to leave or else" type of scenario. For us as children, it was exciting and very scary, and I have a whole book worth of stories to tell about our journey through those years. My parents never complained, never faltered, and it was their example in adaptation and their resilience in the face of extreme challenges that gave me the strength to pull through my own challenges.

I studied in 14 different schools, none more than 2 years and in 4 different languages. I think I was in Grade 4 3 times and never ever did grade 5, very sketchy education, to say the least. Taiwan was taken over by Japan during World War II and its economy was in tatters when they surrendered, so as government employees, my parents, as everyone else, were paid very little and good education was very expensive. Even though we didn't have much, my parents put everything they have, even mortgaging their flat twice over to ensure we had the best education they could afford. So instead of having fun, partying or hanging out with friends, I was studying, forever trying to learn a new language, or to catch up a completely new syllabus. It was not easy growing up always trying to make friends, breaking into cliques, being the only one left out of popular birthday parties, always the one standing outside looking in. I made it through by being the top student as often as I could.

I matriculated in Bloemfontein, after obtaining my Cambridge O Levels the year before. It was good enough to get me acceptance to Wits Medical School, which I somewhat reluctantly accepted. I wanted to be a mechanic on a Formula 1 team, or a ballet dancer, but my father thought medicine was the better option, maybe because I had spent every spare time I had during my last two years of school as a volunteer in the hospital and crèche. And medicine was a very popular choice for parents. At the end of my first year of medicine and to ensure I truly wanted to work in a hospital environment, I worked at Johannesburg General as a nurse aid for the entire 3 months holiday. I worked hard and I enjoyed the experience.

My parents were transferred and left South Africa midway through my first year of Medicine and left me with as much as they could borrow from the bank. I had R50000 to make it through 7 years of medical school, to live, eat and pay for every single expense. I learnt that a R2 Chelsea bun from the canteen was worth a day and a half of sustenance, that I didn't need anything other than what I already had, that I didn't need to see a doctor or use antibiotics to get better, that staying in Hillbrow

was the cheapest option (once I could convince the landlord that even though I wasn't white, I was trustworthy), that I could make handmade jewelry good enough to sell, and that waitressing was relatively easy money, amongst other things. I never thought it was hard, because I was grateful that I could study and I knew one day it would be better. I attended every lecture, wrote beautiful notes every night, stayed all night and day for every intake, did everything I was allowed to do, and more, and gained as much experience as I could right through medical school. I loved it. I knew how lucky I was to be still studying and I was determined to make the best of it. I learnt to make do on minimal sleep.

I worked in Bara ICU for 18 months, was in Wits Anaesthesia Department as a registrar for 5 years, passed Part I, went through every single rotation, and left the department because I had to take up the responsibility of supporting my family. My husband went through a terrible midlife crisis, suffering from severe debilitating depression and a lot of angst. Needless to say, there was a lot of emotional turmoil in the home, bad decisions and a lot of debt to pay back. It wasn't easy convincing the bank to trust me enough to give me the overdraft they did so I could manage to get us back on track and have the lights on every day. But they did. I worked day and night, sold what I could, downgraded everything, including our home, but not our standards and I made it through without a dent in my credit rating. I appreciate what they did and I am still with the same bank.

After trying my best to keep everything together (including myself) for 5 years, I was brave enough to put an end to the cycle of abuse, both physical and emotional, not only to me, but especially to my precious children. He was a good man, but as a result of untreated depression, lost himself and his family. My eldest son hated me for breaking up the family, despite being on the receiving end of the brunt of the emotional turmoil. It wasn't an easy transition through the teenage years, with finding my son giving up on life being my worst fear. It was upper most in his thoughts during those tumultuous years and we had a lot of drama along the way. During this time, I realized that I was completely burnout. I had no emotions left.

I accumulated a library of self-help books, (over a few hundred) I tried everything I could, from Reiki to meditation, until I pulled myself out of the depths of desperation and a feeling of "it's easier to just die". That wasn't an option available to me because I was solely responsible for my children. I was their sole guardian. Not only do I have to live, I had to learn to love again.

I learnt what unconditional love means and what it takes out of one to give love without expecting anything in return. I learnt how to give love that is totally independent of how the other person treats you. I learnt that it is possible to give and give love, because that is who you are. I also learnt that if you take care and love yourself (even if nobody else does), you don't need to be loved to feel loved, and you have an unending supply of love to give.

I am extremely grateful to say, today, that my children have grown up to be wonderfully loving, resourceful, independent, self confident and as my son puts it: “well brought up”. I understood what it means to lead by example and seeing them the way they are makes me extremely proud of what we have gone through to make us who we are.

I am also grateful to my surgery colleagues that shared my journey. They had stuck with me through thick and thin and have become friends that I could trust with my life. We have come of age. Twenty-one years is a long time.

My life journey was an immense lesson all the way. All the people that I was lucky to share my life with had been an inspiration for bigger and better things. And I am truly grateful for everything that had come my way. I would never have been where I am today without every single person and every single event that I had experienced, no matter how difficult it had been at that time. I am strong, I am healthy and I am happy.

I want to be there for others when they need a helping hand because I know how desperate one can feel when one is struggling. I have been there.



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