

A Pathologist with Panache

JULIETTA FISCELLA, MD '88,
PHYSICIAN AND FASHION DESIGNER

BY
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Each week Julietta Fiscella, MD '88, divides her time between the University of Rochester Medical Center and Highland Hospital, where she serves as clinical assistant professor of pathology and laboratory medicine and associate director of Highland Hospital's Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine. When she has performed her last fine-needle aspiration for the day, this triple-board-certified pathologist sets aside her white coat and heads for her suburban fashion boutique, where she picks up another kind of needle—one for stitching fabric.

PHOTOS BY VINCENT SULLIVAN

Realizing a lifelong dream, Fiscella last year opened a business that bears her name and carries her haute couture creations. Catering to a growing list of clients, she designs one-of-a-kind wedding and christening gowns, mother-of-the-bride dresses, evening wear, and other special-occasion garments.

Not surprisingly, Fiscella turns quite a few heads when people discover that she can hold forth with equal expertise on the structure of cancer cells and the latest looks on the New York runways. Yet from her perspective, the two careers complement one another seamlessly.

“Pathology deals with color and design and how cells form different patterns,” she explains. “I’m a very visual person, and I think in three dimensions. That is what made pathology a natural fit for me, and it’s the same with designing clothes.”

Despite her diverse talents and impressive curriculum vitae, little has come easily to Fiscella in pursuit of her dual careers. While some of her UB medical school classmates knew that Fiscella—then Julietta Whitney—was a single parent, none knew that she was on welfare while pursuing her medical education.

“I always kept that private,” Fiscella recalls. “And, looking at me, you would never have known. I was well dressed because I could make my own clothes. Appearances are deceiving, aren’t they?”

“Always Go for the Highest”

By the time she arrived in Buffalo in 1984, Fiscella was no stranger to poverty. A native of the Caribbean island of St. Lucia, she was the second-youngest of five children born to a self-taught seamstress

and a bank messenger. Like most families on the island, hers was forever struggling to make ends meet.

Nevertheless, Fiscella’s childhood was a happy one. She read widely and was drawn to exploring the out-of-doors, where she found the river’s edge an ideal stomping ground for her innate interest in biology.

Fiscella’s aptitude for fashion design materialized at a young age, as well, although under less positive circumstances. When she would return home from the river bedraggled and late, she was made to sit in the living room as her mother sewed.

Over time, however, the restriction on her freedom didn’t have the punitive effect her parents intended. On the contrary, Fiscella loved watching her mother work. Every stitch and snip intrigued her.

One day, she surprised her mother by asking if she could sew a button on a piece of clothing. “From then on, I never put the needle down,” Fiscella recalls. “After school, after my homework was done, I’d run to my mom and ask, ‘Can I put a hem on? Can I do this?’ I loved it, and I looked forward to it.”

When her mother created a dress for one of her clients, Fiscella produced an identical dress for her doll—with a hat and pocketbook to match.

Still, her parents had higher aspirations for her than a future as a seamstress. Her mother constantly reminded her children that the island was “too small” for them. “She said, ‘You have to go out in the world and find yourself. Go for better opportunities. Never settle. Always go for the highest,’” Fiscella remembers. “As soon as we got to be teenagers, she said, ‘Go.’”



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PHOTO BY ANNETTE LEIN



Visualization Exercises

Over time, each of the children left the island. When she was 19, Fiscella followed suit, immigrating to the United States when one of her sisters invited her to move to Long Island to live with her.

“It was very difficult because I was very close to my mother,” she says. “But at the same time I realized that there was nothing for me to do there. I had reached my maximum on the island, so the move was for a better life.”

Before Fiscella’s life improved, however, it took a dramatic turn for the worse. Two years after moving to New York, she married and four years later, when their daughter was only 18

months old, the couple separated. Her sister had by then moved to Texas, which meant that Fiscella was alone in New York City, left to raise a child on what remained of her savings.

At that point, she made a pact with herself: She would go to college, and then on to medical school. She would become a doctor.

Fiscella enrolled at St. John’s University as a biology major, but floundered in her freshman year. Her schoolwork suffered as she juggled academics with single parenthood. Lacking a solid foundation in the sciences, her courses overwhelmed her. Unaccustomed to multiple-choice exams—in St. Lucia, students were given only

essay tests—she earned all Cs and Ds her first semester.

To motivate herself, Fiscella posted affirmations on her bathroom mirror that reinforced her goals: “I will support myself and my daughter.” “I will help my parents.” “I will be at the top of my profession.”

By her sophomore year, Fiscella’s grades had improved, but her savings had run dry. To make ends meet, she saw no other option than to apply for welfare.

Lean times meant that she had to make meals stretch as far as possible while putting money aside so she could take her daughter, Nicole, out for a modest meal once a month. To bolster her morale, Fiscella always performed the same mental exercise: She imagined herself as a doctor.

“The whole picture would play over and over in my mind,” she says. “Every moment of the day was spent focusing on my goal. I visualized myself in a white coat with a stethoscope, helping patients.”

At Home in Buffalo

It has been two decades, but Fiscella vividly remembers the plane landing in the midst of a Buffalo blizzard for her medical school interview.

The weather notwithstanding, she was immediately taken with the school. The warm reception from faculty and staff, the well-coordinated arrangements for her brief stay, and the friendly student who escorted her to various meetings had the cumulative effect of making her feel respected and accepted.

“It was like it was already my home,” she says. “That night I told my mother that no matter which other school accepted me, I was coming to Buffalo.”

Like many of her peers, Fiscella found medical school grueling. Being away from her daughter throughout the day made the experience more challenging still.

“But, again, I had my focus,” she says. “I had all these people depending on my success, especially my daughter. It was a different experience than many other people have.”

Different indeed. While other students were studying, Fiscella was standing in line at schools and churches to receive free eggs or cheese. One day Nicole came home from school in tears, upset that kids had teased her because she received meals from the subsidized food line. In response, Fiscella started skipping her own lunches so her daughter could have them to take to school.

At the supermarket one afternoon, she found that she didn’t have enough food stamps to pay for her groceries. With her daughter by her side, she watched in mortification as the clerk flicked on the checkout light and began shouting for the manager to come and attend to the problem.

PHOTO BY JAMES SCHMITTER



Fiscella’s Medical Bag

A recent design that Julietta Fiscella is proud of is a medical bag that is as fashionable as it is functional.

The leather and canvas tote comes in two different patterns: one is adorned with a microscope; the other, a stethoscope and blood pressure cuff and a pair of lungs. Fiscella also has designed makeup bags, ties, and scarves featuring the same patterns.

She says she wanted to do something special for the medical profession. “I wanted the bag to be new and different than the old black medical bag,” she says. “I wanted to create a bag that is more stylized, more personalized.”

To view Fiscella’s selection of medical bags, ties and scarves, as well as her other designs, visit her Web site at juliettafiscella.com. (Fiscella’s daughter, Nicole, models the dress on the Web site’s homepage.)

Even worse was her routine visit to the Social Services office. Although she made her own clothes, she purposely dressed down for these appointments so the social worker wouldn’t suspect her of being better off than she was.

“I don’t wish anyone to go through what I went through,” Fiscella says of her years on welfare. “People make judgments about who you are. But at the same time, I knew that if I could put my pride on the shelf, I could get through this time and achieve my goal.”

To that end, Fiscella immersed herself in her medical education. “I ate it. I slept it. I dreamed it,” she says. “When you want to achieve something like this, there’s no way to be casual about it. Over and over I saw myself working in the emergency room or in some other department of the hospital.”

In her second year, Fiscella found where she belonged in the hospital while peering into a microscope in a pathology course.



“Once I got into pathology, it all came together,” she says.

As Fiscella’s future professional life was beginning to take shape, so too was her future personal life. While in medical school, she met and began dating Kevin Fiscella, a family physician.

The couple married in 1989, a year after Fiscella graduated. That same year she began her residency training in pathology at Buffalo General Hospital and Strong Memorial.

Today, Fiscella is board certified in surgical pathology, cytopathology, and clinical pathology and laboratory medicine.

Her husband is a physician and researcher in the Department of Family Medicine at the University of Rochester’s Medical Center. Their son, Chaz, is 15 years old and a sophomore in high school. Nicole, 25, is a model and restaurant manager in New York City.

Having established herself as a physician and having achieved every goal she had set for herself more than two decades ago, Fiscella decided it was time for her to answer her other muse—

the one that comes to her in swatches of fabric and color.

“My spirit said to me, ‘Hey, what happened to that other part of you before medicine came along? You’ve got to fulfill that part of you.’ So I decided to open my shop.”

Some people spend their entire lives searching for a satisfying career. Fiscella marvels at the fact that she has discovered two that she loves. And even though it’s been a long and unlikely journey, she still sees herself as that child by the water’s edge, fascinated by the wonders of nature. She still sees herself as the little girl who pored over every issue of *Vogue’s* pattern magazine with the kind of intensity that some kids reserve for comic books.

“I was meant to do both,” she says. “So many people say, ‘I get up in the morning and have to go to work.’ But I love going to work. I can’t wait for the alarm to ring. I can’t wait for the sun to rise so I can get to one job, and I can’t wait for the sun to set so I can get to the other.” **BP**

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