

Fordham Footsteps: Peter Paganussi, FCRH '80, Interview Transcript

Matt Burns:

Welcome to Fordham Footsteps. The podcast that features Fordham alumni and discusses their path from their time as a student to their current career. Some will have a direct correlation to their majors and others will describe why they took some unexpected turns.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Either way, expect an insider's guide to certain industries and some great stories from our esteemed alumni. I'm Sara Hunt Munoz, Senior Director for Strategic Initiatives.

Matt Burns:

And I'm Matt Burns, Associate Director for Young Alumni and Student Engagement. And with us today is Dr. Peter Paganussi, Fordham College at Rose Hill, Class of 1980. Thank you so much for being here, Peter.

Peter Paganussi:

It's a pleasure and an honor.

Matt Burns:

Peter, tell us about your majors. You were a biology and anthropology double major, is that correct?

Peter Paganussi:

Actually, I was biology and anthropology came to me late.

Matt Burns:

Okay.

Peter Paganussi:

And it was a minor. It was suggested by a wonderful professor I had. Wasn't until my junior year that I actually took an anthropology course, really enjoyed the professor, Dr. Finkel. I wound up taking three or four more courses with him and then another one. And that's when they told me, they said you have enough for a minor.

Matt Burns:

Why not?

Peter Paganussi:

It was something I enjoyed. Yep. Yep.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Did you choose biology because you knew you wanted to get into the medical field?

Peter Paganussi:

Sort of. Yes and no. I love biology. Biology is my favorite science. I love life sciences. I love studying about living organisms. Certainly it was a natural from medical school. In a way it's interesting, you ask that when I was there many, including professors, some of them were a little cynical and assumed that most of us were biology majors, simply because we wanted to go to medical school. I actually enjoyed the science. I still do. I wound up doing research when I was at Fordham with a wonderful professor, Dr Hamada.

Peter Paganussi:

And we did some nerve growth factor experiments. Actually we were doing experiments that followed in the footsteps of a woman by the name of Rita Levi-Montalcini. She wound up winning the Nobel prize in medicine. She was from Northern Italy and her family were Jewish. She was a survivor of the Italian version of the Holocaust and was a pioneer in science for women. It was cool. The only reason I got involved was, again, my love of biology, but certainly it was natural for somebody who wanted to go into medicine. It's something I knew since I was a boy that I wanted to do. It was in the back of my mind that, well, this is what I need to know to get to where I want to be.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

And Fordham was a natural choice because you grew up in the Bronx and had gone to Fordham Prep?

Peter Paganussi:

From the moment I set foot on that campus as a little fellow with a big tie and lots of big books. And when I started at the Prep, we started in Hughes Hall, which is now home to the Gabelli School of Business, but it was Fordham Prep at the time. And I never felt so at home anywhere other than my own house than I did Fordham. It was a natural to go to Fordham University. I love the colors too, maroon, how can you go wrong with-

Matt Burns:

Everyone looks good in maroon.

Peter Paganussi:

... maroon. Absolutely. I loved it there. Like I said, I felt right at home. When I went to the Prep, I was in something called the three year program, which was great, but somewhat unfortunate. I did high school in three years. I graduated in '75 and I was leaning on either Fordham or NYU.

Peter Paganussi:

And at the College Fair, I happened to cross a school by the name of Stevens Institute of Technology, which is actually just across the river in Hoboken, New Jersey. And believe it or not in the day I was a pretty good baseball player. The baseball coach had actually seen me play in a game or two and he wooed me to Stevens. I went there for the year '75 into '76. I made the team as a freshman. It was heavily on engineering and mathematical type of sciences. And I felt like I was getting too far away from life science, goes back to the biology thing.

Peter Paganussi:

I decided after a year I wasn't as happy. I transferred back to Fordham. And once again, when I started the transfer process and I set foot on the campus, it was almost like this huge weight came off my shoulders. I felt like, okay, I'm home. This is where I belong. I decided since I'd rushed through high school a little bit, I would just start from scratch at Fordham. I did three years of high school, but I did five years of college.

Matt Burns:

Now, did you commute when you were a student?

Peter Paganussi:

I did for the first three years and my last year. I lived believe it or not, it was odd, it was about three quarters of the year I lived on campus. I forget what you guys call that building now, we called it 555.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

It's Walsh Hall now.

Peter Paganussi:

Walsh Hall. That's right.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Yeah.

Matt Burns:

Yeah.

Peter Paganussi:

Because we are a Fordham family, my brother Michael graduated in, I'm just trying to remember. I'm pretty sure it was '91. And he was Fordham College as well. And now he works in Singapore. He's a Compliance Officer for an investment company there. And my daughter, my baby Claire graduated from Gabelli in 2015.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Oh, congratulations. Okay.

Peter Paganussi:

Thank you. And it was wonderful. I got to give her her diploma, which was a huge thrill for me coming back to campus. And she lives on the Upper East Side and works for West Elm now using her marketing degree. We bleed maroon in my family.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

When you were on campus, it looks like you were involved with some of the activities. You were part of the United Student Government.

Peter Paganussi:

I was. Wow, you guys did your homework. Yes. I was actually in the USG.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Peter Paganussi:

As we called it, for all four years. I was also Chairman of the Concert Committee for a couple years. Back then I was part of something called the, I don't know if you guys still do that at the CAB, the Campus Activity-

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Yep. They still call it that.

Matt Burns:

They sure do. Did you bring anyone great to campus while you were there?

Peter Paganussi:

Well, it's funny, those were tough times, but we did Charlie Daniels Band. We did right before he got big, with The Devil Went Down to Georgia. He wasn't quite as popular yet. David Bromberg, who you guys may or may not know, but my big claim to fame got me in trouble because we wound up losing money and I pushed hard to get the concert on a Friday night, because I thought that would be a good night, but it turns out it wasn't. But I brought a band called Renaissance there. They were the remnants of the Yardbirds. They had a female singer and they did a fusion kind of rock, which was big in the '70s. But we did a couple of smaller shows that did well too. Believe it or not, we brought a band up called the Bermuda Strollers who did reggae. And we had a reggae party and that went over well. But I enjoyed my time on the Campus Activity Board. One of the things I really enjoyed was something, again, I don't know if you still call it American Age where we brought in-

Matt Burns:

The lecture series?

Peter Paganussi:

The lecture series. Yep.

Matt Burns:

Still exists. Yeah.

Peter Paganussi:

I got to have the lunch with George McGovern. We ran against Nixon, Senator McGovern. And I also got to have lunch because all the chairs were invited to these activities with Jane Fonda and her then husband, Tom Hayden, and-

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Very cool.

Peter Paganussi:

... I was very impressed, I have to tell you by Tom Hayden, who was, I think a president of SDS, Students for a Democratic Society, part of the big Chicago presidential riots. But dare I say, I was more impressed with him than with Jane Fonda. He was interesting. I wound up accidentally sitting next to him and he was a delightful fellow, very smart, very engaging, quick sense of humor.

Peter Paganussi:

And in fact, I joked, I said, you'd fit right in here in the Bronx with your quick, wit funny comebacks.

Matt Burns:

Sure.

Peter Paganussi:

But yeah, when I was on the student government, I was given an interesting task. I was a Senator for my class and my second year we decided that we needed to rewrite a lot of our constitution. I was given the task with another Senator. They said, you guys have to go dig out the original copy in the library, Duane Library at the time. And come back to us, when we dug it out of a dusty bin, we almost fainted when we saw the last person who wrote the constitution for the USG that we were using, it was I believe 1959. And it was G. Gordon Liddy.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Yep.

Matt Burns:

Wow.

Peter Paganussi:

Who had actually written the constitution and this was 19 probably 77. It was only a few years after Watergate. It was a shocker or whatever.

Matt Burns:

It was due for an upgrade.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Yeah.

Peter Paganussi:

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. But another interesting character. Fordham's had a lot of illustrious grads and I'm proud to be one of them.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

It sounds like too, that you have a well rounded college experience, that you're really educating the whole person, like we say. You've got the biology, the anthropology, the leadership and government, the lecture series, the music and entertainment. It sounds like you really encapsulate what Fordham stands for.

Peter Paganussi:

I enjoyed my time as a "commuter." I was not one of those people who threw their books in the car at two o'clock in the afternoon and buzzed home, I would stay. I'd sometimes walk over to Pugsley's and have dinner, grab a chicken parm or pizza. I had a lot of friends. I was friends with a lot of people who were borders. My mom was a great cook and I had a nice house, but I-

Matt Burns:

You wanted to be there. Where it was happening.

Peter Paganussi:

Exactly.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Yeah.

Peter Paganussi:

I wasn't in a hurry to leave campus. I just felt so at home there, it still does. Every time I go back. My wife, God bless her, she went to Cornell, undergrad, and Cornell's a beautiful place if you've ever been there. But she was really blown away the first time I took her to Fordham and it's funny, I have three children. My oldest went to Cornell. My son almost went to Fordham, but in the end he wound up going William and Mary. We live in Virginia. I love that boy, he saved me a lot of money.

Peter Paganussi:

But my daughter, we dragged her around, my younger one, on a lot of these college tours. And when her time came up, I sat her down and I said, okay, Claire. She said, "Dad, I know what you're going to say. You're going to ask me about college and where I want to go. And there's a couple I want to visit, but I'm pretty sure I know where want go already." And I looked at her, I said "Where?" She said, "Fordham." My heart almost jumped out of my chest. I was so-

Sara Hunt Munoz:

I bet. I bet.

Peter Paganussi:

And she loved her time there. She embraced it. Maybe even more than I did, which is saying something.

Matt Burns:

There's a lot to catch up on what's happened since then. Talk to us about your life after graduating? Looks like you actually went for a master's at Georgetown before you went for your MD.

Peter Paganussi:

I'm only slightly embarrassed. But when I applied to medical school, I didn't get in the first go around and I was a little disheartened. I was trying to figure out what I was going to do. A lot of students jumped out of the country, but I was hell bent on going to school in the United States. And I said, I'm just going to figure this out. And I literally by accident, bumped into a classmate from Fordham Prep, who also went to the University, at Rockefeller Center and we started talking and he told me about this program at Georgetown and Georgetown had a one year master's degree in physiology and biophysics. And it was an entree into medical school. There's a number of these programs now. At the time, Georgetown was very unique. Wasn't advertised in any of their literature. I was fortunate to find out about it.

Peter Paganussi:

And I called another classmate from the Prep who was actually in the program the year before. And literally within 48 hours, I was on a plane to Washington, D.C, and I met the Administrative Assistant for the program. And she immediately took a liking to me. That's how I got in. And I did the year and I was fortunate enough to do well enough to get into the medical school. Ironically, the very first school I got rejected from the year before was Georgetown. And that's where I wound up going. And more ironically was, as I like to tell people, I went to a Jesuit high school. I went to a Jesuit college and I went to a Jesuit medical school. When Father Healy, who was then president handed me my diploma, he actually muttered something like, congratulations, young man, this was quite an accomplishment. And I laughed and I shook his hand and said, "Father, I'm just riding the Jesuit pipeline."

Peter Paganussi:

And he was a little taken aback, but that he laughed and he squeezed my hand a little harder, but I'm very proud of my Jesuit education. The striving for excellence, caring for others, fighting for justice, the three main themes of Fordham, resonate deeply with me. And if you're a physician, those three could not be more important. Striving for excellence in everything you do. Caring for others well, my gosh, that's a no brainer. And then fighting for justice.

Peter Paganussi:

I spent my career as an emergency physician. And one of the reasons why I picked the specialty was I felt like I'd always be in a position to help the downtrodden, if you will. Even in the '80s, when I was coming out, there were people who used the emergency room because they had no other access to healthcare. And I just felt like it was part of the mission of service to take care of these kind of people. It was natural for me. Yes, I went to grad school then I went to medical school at Georgetown, got a wonderful education, continued in that Jesuit tradition. Then I was fortunate enough to do my residency at a very highly ranked residency program in emergency medicine, Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit. My wife and I met in medical school and loved the Washington, D.C, area so we targeted as a place to return. I knew I was coming back to the East Coast. And I've been here ever since.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Where in the medical school experience do you land on emergency medicine? Obviously you have to dabble in a lot of different specialties. When did you make that decision?

Peter Paganussi:

I think I made it about halfway to three quarters of the way through my third year. Most medical schools are still the same traditional medical schools. The first two years are largely didactic. And the last two

you put on a little white coat and you do clinical rotations. That's when you learn the medicines, surgery, ENT, dermatology, radiology, all the specialties. I started medical school, I had this idea of myself as a physician. I was thinking about general medicine, family practice. And then I thought, I don't know why I thought this because I was a good athlete, but I thought I'm too clumsy to be a surgeon. I think surgery's out. Well then as I got through my rotations, I really enjoyed surgery. I enjoyed fixing things literally with my hands versus the long mental debates of some of the other specialties.

Peter Paganussi:

But I went in with a totally open mind. When I did psychiatry, I told myself if I like this, I might choose this as a career. I loved pediatrics. I loved orthopedics. I liked general surgery, but I did like medicine. I enjoyed cardiology a lot too. I didn't know what I was going to do. And then I was introduced to the Chairman of the Emergency Department at Georgetown, who's a fellow New Yorker. He grew up in Brooklyn. Dr. Rolnick, Michael Rolnick, and we started to talk. And then, I think sometimes I was smarter when I was young than as I've gotten older, but I started going to the library and reading all the ER journals at the time. This was around '84. In those days, emergency medicine was a very primordial specialty. We had only become a specialty in 1979.

Peter Paganussi:

We are the youngest of the specialties. The field was very small and I was reading a lot of the same authors and what blew me away is when I went to interview for my residencies, I met these people and almost a couple of times blurted out something stupid like, wow, I've read every paper you've ever written. But what attracted me was a couple of things, one, I ran track in high school and when I ran track, I was a sprinter. And as a sprinter, I love to give 120% and turn on the afterburners. But I like to know there's a finish line soon. And emergency medicine afforded that, tough shifts, but you know the end of the shift is coming. It wasn't something that drags on and on and on. The other thing was I wanted to be a doctor so badly all my life.

Peter Paganussi:

And I felt so fortunate to get into medical school. And I thought I never want to be in a position where I'm somewhere and somebody shouts, we need a doctor now to help. Emergency medicine gave me that where it didn't matter what the problem was, I have an approach. Now I will tell you, after 33 years of doing that, I recently told somebody I'd never want to hear a nurse shout again, we need a doctor in here now, after 33 years, that got a little tiring, but I still am very, very pleased I chose it. I've always been able to help. I can always start things rolling, whether you're there for a mental health problem, whether you're there because you're bleeding all over the floor. I know how to get things going.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Almost didn't have to choose. You get to do a little bit of everything.

Peter Paganussi:

Exactly. Exactly. I love the extremes of age in medicine. I love little kids and I love geriatrics. I really enjoy taking care of the elderly. You get to do that in emergency medicine. And it's fun. The only other specialty that I really got almost dragged into was orthopedics. You do see a lot of orthopedic injuries typically in an emergency room. And that was one of the things I enjoyed the most taking care of fractures and dislocations and things like that. It's very satisfying when something is broke and bent, to

straighten it out and the patient looks at you with incredible gratitude, it's an immediate satisfaction. It's like the sprinting thing.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Peter Paganussi:

When you cross the finish line, it's immediately satisfying.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Peter you've done a bit of teaching yourself, correct?

Peter Paganussi:

Yes. I've had a number of clinical faculty positions over the course of my career. I worked for 20 years at a place called Inova Fairfax Hospital, which is a large trauma center in Northern Virginia. And they've changed flags a number of times. But while I was there, Georgetown was the school that sent the most students there. It was wonderful to have faculty position at my Alma Mater.

Peter Paganussi:

I taught their medical students and then the residency program in emergency medicine at the time was fascinating. It was combined between GW and Georgetown. Those schools usually wind up throwing rocks at each other, but they cooperated brilliantly for the ER residency. But over time they then both went their separate ways. But I was very involved with also the Uniform Services Health Science Academy, Uses they call themselves. We used to get students from the military. I left Fairfax after 20 years and I joined a different group in the area. And towards the end of my career, the last few years I was working at a small, critical access hospital in the panhandle of West Virginia. And it's part of the West Virginia University System. I had a teaching position there and we had medical students and family practice residents who came through.

Matt Burns:

Do you use anything you've learned from Fordham professors or draw on anything from them in any of the teaching that you do?

Peter Paganussi:

Absolutely. One of the things I enjoy and I'm most proud of is I've always been, since I was a resident, a member of the American College of Emergency Physicians, ACEP for short. And I was president actually, the Virginia Chapter for a couple of years. We have subsections almost like clubs, if you will, wilderness medicine, travel medicine, sports medicine. I'm one in founding members of the medical humanities section. I still love literature. One of my big regrets about medical school is we didn't have time to delve deeper into the history of medicine, which is incredible. It's fascinating. It's wonderful. There's that old saying "We stand on the shoulders of giants." Well, we do. While I was at Fordham University, some of my favorite courses were not in the science department. I loved literature. I took an English literature course. That was fabulous.

Peter Paganussi:

The first book we read, ironically enough was Daniel Defoe's Journal of the Plague Year, had a profound effect on me as a biology major. And I've never forgotten that book. When I would teach, they would sometimes ask me, how do you straighten a leg out? How do you, blah, blah, blah? And I would look at them and say, have you ever read Daniel Defoe's Journal of the Plague Year? The other thing I used to love to do, and to me, it's a very Fordham thing, if you ask any medical student, when you study surgery and you learn about doing an abdominal exam, nowadays everybody gets a CT scan so you cheat. But in my day when I came out, we weren't doing CTs on the abdomen. The exam was very important. There's two names in the physical exam of an abdomen.

Peter Paganussi:

One is McBurney, there's McBurney's Point. The other is Murphy, Murphy's Sign. When the students would present, they would say, there's no Murphy's Sign, or he wasn't tender in McBurney's Point. And then they would wait for me to say something. And like some of my Fordham professors, I would let some line out like you do when you're fishing. And I would say, do you know who McBurney was? Any idea, any clue? You know who Murphy was? They were both surgeons from the turn of the last century. They were almost contemporaries. One was in Chicago, one was in New York. The students would always comment later that they would learn about McBurney's Point from me. But more importantly, they learned who Charles McBurney was. Again, I think that the Fordham motto, "Wisdom and Learning"-

Sara Hunt Munoz:

And learning. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Peter Paganussi:

The wisdom I gained was taking care of the whole patient, but you never stopped learning. But I think what I got out of Fordham was the intellectual curiosity. I learned about McBurney's Point, but nobody told me who McBurney was. I had to figure that out on my own. I learned about Murphy's Sign, but nobody told me who Murphy was. And it was that curiosity that I gained at Fordham, love of reading, love of literature. I always joke that if you go to Fordham, I think the next big success for you is jeopardy, right?

Sara Hunt Munoz:

[crosstalk 00:23:43].

Matt Burns:

Right.

Peter Paganussi:

Because, you can probably answer a lot of those questions. And when my children were growing up, they would look at me sometimes and go, dad, how did you know that? Most of my time I was answering, I learned it at Fordham.

Matt Burns:

You weren't worrying just about the whole patient, you're worrying about the whole student too, that you're trying to form. A related question there and thinking about some of the different decisions you

made at the different points, you mentioned a couple of Fordham professors. Did you have anyone that you thought of or looked to as a mentor either at those moments or in the medical field specifically?

Peter Paganussi:

Absolutely. I had them all throughout my life. One of my first mentors, we had an interesting relationship. It started, I wouldn't say rocky, but he was tough nut to crack. When I was at Fordham, there was a professor, Dr. Hamada, Spencer Hamada. And he was a very interesting fellow. He's Japanese American grew up in Hawaii. And when he was a boy after World War II, he was playing on the beach and he accidentally touched the leftover landmine and blew off his arm. He had a prosthesis and he taught molecular biology. And it was a class that everybody was afraid of. Do not take molecular biology, that guy's really tough. I was always one of those people who, if I heard something like that, I had to know why. It was one of the great courses I took there. It truly helped me in medical school.

Peter Paganussi:

But I mentioned earlier, I did research. Well, the research I did was with him. It was before I took his course. I went to see him and I walked in and he looked at me and he said, "You're only a sophomore, what makes you think I would let you come to my laboratory?" I said, "Well, nothing lets me think that I'm just hoping that maybe I can learn something from you." And I think he appreciated my answer. In the beginning, he treated me a bit standoffish. And what I started out doing was literally sweeping the floors of the lab, cleaning the surfaces. And slowly, I think he saw that I had the dogged determination, that I always showed up. Rain shine, sweet, snow, I was there and I never complained. Slowly he started showing me what they were doing and teaching me bit by bit.

Peter Paganussi:

And what he was doing was he was doing research on neurons. He was taking dorsal root ganglia out of chick embryos and growing them in tissue culture. And then I'm very pleased to say that I've always been a good problem solver. One day as I got deeper into it, what slowed the research was plucking these little tiny ganglion from the spine of a chick embryo. We were doing it under a dissecting scope. And one day I just thought, well, they're in a chain. If I just pull this tissue apart, I could probably pull the whole chain out. And I did. And he was blown away because it would take hours to pluck out four or five of these things. And in 20 minutes I could pluck out over a dozen. It really increased the speed of the research and he was able to publish papers.

Peter Paganussi:

He put my name on several of those papers, which was wonderful. Dr. Hamada was huge influence on me. Dr. Finkel, I mentioned earlier was an anthropologist, just a very quirky guy, but very wonderful professor. And one of the classes I took with him was literally called Digging Up Bones. And because of that, I had to learn human skeletal anatomy, because if you're an anthropologist and you're digging up people, you got to know what kind of bones you're digging up. When I got to Georgetown, anatomy was another very tough course and there was so much crammed in it. We got to the end. And one of the professors said, we don't have time to teach you skeletal anatomy so you have to learn it on your own. I already knew it. And it was because of my education and Fordham. I also did well in anatomy.

Peter Paganussi:

Whereas a lot of people had trouble identifying some of the smaller bones that I had to learn the names of from Dr. Finkel and then, oh my God, going through medical school and very much my residency, I

had some wonderful, wonderful mentors. One of them when I was a resident was a fellow by the name of Emmanuel Rivers, Manny for short, Manny Rivers. He was actually mentioned by name on, I want to say it was Grey's Anatomy. I didn't watch that show. My wife liked it. But one day I happened to be sitting there, reading my favorite journal, Sports Illustrated, and I heard them mention Manny Rivers. He is the man who came up with the codified treatment of sepsis that we use to this day. He was a wonderful teacher, he was actually only a few years out of his residency when he came back to teach us. And he was great.

Matt Burns:

Thinking about some of the mentors you had and now thinking about current Fordham students, what advice would you offer students who are bio majors who want to get into the healthcare field? Especially considering what the last year must have been like as an ER professional with a COVID 19 pandemic.

Peter Paganussi:

The last year was unprecedented. It was really tough walking in and out of rooms, both physically putting on all the PPE, the masks, the gloves, the popper suits we wore. And then the fear, I didn't want to contract an illness that could kill me, but I was also mostly petrified at bringing it home. I did not want to infect my wife. I did not want to infect my grown children who had come back home because of the pandemic. I had a whole procedure when I would come home, I would disrobe in my garage, the laundry room is right there, throw my stuff in the laundry room, throw on a robe, go right into the shower, scrub myself down with zinc based compounds. It was tough. But what I would tell somebody who's thinking about medicine, there's a couple of things I would say. First of all, if you can make the time, it is wonderful to learn about the history of medicine it's rich and it's deep.

Peter Paganussi:

And when you see what our forebears did and how they approach things, it gives you an appreciation of what we're doing now. It also makes it easier to learn some of the complex science. There's some authors I used to tell the medical students all the time, you should read somebody by the name of Louis Thomas. He wrote a book called The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher. That book was published in the early '70s. And to this day I pull it out periodically. It was brilliantly written and it's almost as jermaine now, as it was then. Just a brilliant writer. He wrote other books too, but that book is brilliant. If you want to be a physician, it's great to read. In fact, he talks about vaccines as being the number one medical technology available, back in 1973, he wrote this. Steven Jay Gould, not a physician, but a professor at Harvard of anthropology and archeology wrote some just brilliant essays.

Peter Paganussi:

And I always tell medical students, if you want to understand the scientific mind and a scientific approach, read Steven Jay Gould. Back in the early 2000s where I was working was one of the first hospitals in the area to have medical scribes. The most of them are interested in a career in medicine, either medical school or going to become a PA. They help you get your chart done and they follow the doctor around and write everything down so we don't have to. One of them, Christian, a very bright guy who had gone to Princeton, hadn't gotten into medical school the first go around because in the early 2000s, it was like me in the late '70s, it was very difficult, it was a very difficult time. He said to me one day, he said, "Dr. Paganussi, I have an interview at EVMS, Eastern Virginia Medical School."

Peter Paganussi:

He said, "Do you have any words of wisdom?" I was actually picked at Georgetown to be one of the two students on the Admissions Committee, my senior year. I had quite an insight into what they were looking for. Now, it was 25 years later, but I said to him, I'm going to tell you something and I don't want to get you in trouble because I know one of the things they always tell you guys is don't go into an interview when they ask you why you want to become a doctor because that's really the biggest question, don't sit there and say, because I want to help people because it sounds really trite. I looked at him and I said, "Here's what I'll tell you as a physician. I would say, here's my answer. And I'm going to explain it because I want to help people."

Peter Paganussi:

But then you got to be ready to follow that with why? Why do you want to do it? Christian went to EVMS. He had his interview and he said, there I was with the Assistant Dean of the medical school, and he said to me, "Okay, young man, I've got to ask it. Why do you want to go to medical school? Why do you want to be a doctor?" And Christian said, I thought I'd take a chance on what you said. And I covered my eyes like, oh my God, here it comes. And he said, "I looked up and told the Assistant Dean, because I want to help people." And he said, I'll tell you why. And then he said, I gave him a very thoughtful answer about why I enjoy helping people. And he said, one of the things I said was I work with this doctor.

Peter Paganussi:

He mentioned me by name apparently, who enjoys it so much that everybody can see and feel it. He said the Assistant Dean looked at me, he pulled his glasses off, he jumped up behind his desk and he said, "Young man, stand up." Christian said, I stood up and I was ready to faint. He came around the desk and he said, "I'm going to do something I've never done." And he gave him a hug. And he said, I've been doing this 30 years, I've been waiting, waiting for one of you guys to give me that answer. And PS Christian graduated from EVMS. Ironically enough he went into infectious diseases and he works out on the West Coast now, but there's nothing wrong with telling another doctor, you do this because you want to help people. What else do we do? It is the essence of what we do.

Peter Paganussi:

I would tell a young student do not be afraid to say that. Now you have to explain why, you have to give a cogent reason why, you should have a little list. And that's where the Steven Jay Gould essays come in, because you should bring it full circle. And after 33 years in the ER, it's still like shivers up my spine. It's like fireworks on the 4th of July. It's like Pugsley's Pizza, that first bite. It's just a thrill. When I turn in, I start to walk out of the room and the patient looks at me and says, doctor, excuse me, do you have a private practice? You know you hit it out of the park. Any patient that says that to you, they want to come back to see you. They want you to be their doctor. How much better does that get? Why? Because I helped them.

Peter Paganussi:

I offered them some compassion. I listened, I sat and I listened. I sat on the side of the bed and I listened to them and I let them talk. There was a study done a number of years ago, they looked at nurses, they looked at doctors and they said a doctor interrupts a patient, it was like 25 seconds into their first dialogue, a nurse waits about 32 seconds. I just let them talk. And what's amazing is what they'll tell you, if you let them speak. And I always tell the students, respect patients as experts in their own disease.

Now yes, there's Dr. Google and yes there's people who think they have these weird maladies and they don't. They have something more common, more banal, but they know what they feel. You don't know what they feel. They have to tell you that. My parents and the Jesuits gave me that spirit. And it's the spirit that I will always carry with me.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Well, we talked about intellectual curiosity and lifelong learning. After 33 years in emergency medicine, what's next for you?

Peter Paganussi:

Well, it's interesting. 33 years, it's a long time in emergency medicine. It made me a Methuselah in the specialty. When I started Ronald Reagan was still president. We were writing on paper charts. It was pretty primitive compared to the way things are now. I had a good run, but at this point, nights, holidays, weekends, it was getting a bit much and so I flipped. I recently just took a job with a company that does occupational medicine. They do a bit of urgent care work too.

Peter Paganussi:

I'll still be sewing lacerations and taking care of sports type injuries, but primarily working with employees and employers to take care of work related injuries, work related traumas, people who worked in restaurants who splash stuff in their eyes, burn their skin, cut themselves, injure themselves, people lifting boxes. I'll be doing physical exams for fitness for duty, things like that. Compared to what I was doing, it may seem mundane in a way, but I look forward to a certain amount of mundaneness. It'll also keep me engaged in the idea that I can still help people and I can help them get back to work, which is important. I can help make sure they're safe at work, which is important. I can use the knowledge I recruit over all these years and don't have to break stride too much. That's what's next.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Well, Peter, it's been delight to get to know you and your story and how it started here at Fordham. Thank you again.

Peter Paganussi:

Like I said, it's an honor for me to be here. My love of the university has never changed and it's only grown more exponentially to see how wonderful the school's turned out, people like you guys. My mother's family's from the Hudson Valley, Father O'Hare after he retired used to say mass, sometimes at a church called the Blessed Kateri, which is up in Dutchess County, in New York. And one time I was pumping gas at a mobile station and I looked up and there was Father O'Hare and I actually had a Fordham shirt on, he almost tripped over the gas hose to come to running over. He said, "Where did you get that shirt? Did you go to Fordham?" I said, "Yes." And I went, [inaudible 00:38:28]? And we had a delightful conversation. I bought him an ice cream cone that and I was talking to him and we sat at the picnic area.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Peter Paganussi:

And we just talked about the university. And he said, "Gives me great delight to see somebody like you." I told him I'd become a physician. And I said, "Right back at you, Father." I've always felt that Fordham had such great potential in the '70s. And someday if the city came back the university would explode and I'll take a little credit for being prescient there. Thank you once again, both of you.

Matt Burns:

Thank you. All right. Well, that's another addition to Fordham Footsteps.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Fordham Footsteps is brought to you by the Fordham University Alumni Association.

Matt Burns:

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