

# Inspiring Women

## Episode 13: Dr. YiDing Yu

Laurie McGraw:

Welcome to Inspiring Women with Laurie McGraw. I am your host, Laurie McGraw. I have spent the past 30 years in leadership and over the years, I've to learn one thing: women need women. And not just any women but inspiring women. Tune in every week to hear from women at the pinnacle of their careers and from others who are just starting out. Episodes can be found at [inspiringwomen.show](http://inspiringwomen.show), or subscribe on your favorite podcast app. Thanks for listening, and I hope you will be inspired.

Laurie McGraw:

Welcome to another episode of Inspiring Women and I am very excited to be speaking today with Dr. YiDing Yu. She is the Chief Medical Officer of Olive, a really well-known and exciting startup company that's raised hundreds of millions of dollars. We'll hear more about that. Dr. Yu is a practicing physician, serial entrepreneur. She's passionate about transforming the way we imagine and deliver healthcare.

Laurie McGraw:

Now she is a serial entrepreneur. She's been named woman entrepreneur of the year by Cartier Women's Initiative Awards. She's a skilled business operator. She was previously the Chief Medical Officer of Verata Health. That was then later acquired by Olive. She founded and pioneered Frictionless Prior Authorization there but she founded and was CEO of a company called Twiage.

Laurie McGraw:

She did this at the early stage of her career. She practices at Mass General Brigham, then more recently at Atrius Health and she has won a number of innovation awards over her career. Dr. Yu, I'm so excited to be talking to you today.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

Thank you so much for having me. I'm really thrilled to be here.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, great. Let's just dive in. So what I always like to start with in Inspiring Women with people like you with tremendous careers, what are you doing right now? What are you focused on today?

Dr. YiDing Yu:

So I have an incredibly fun job and when I was a little girl, trying to be and thinking that I'll grow up to be a doctor, I probably never thought that I'd be Chief Medical Officer of an AI healthcare startup. But that is what I do today and I am focused on finding the ways that we use technology and specifically artificial intelligence to accelerate patient care and improve access to care in hospitals and payers across the country.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

And so my day-to-day is focused on building those use cases and running one of our core business units that is building technology that automates things like prior authorizations and medical necessity reviews, so that patients can make sure that their care is paid for and reimbursed by health insurance.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

But also so that none of those normally administrative tasks lead to barriers and delays in their care, which is of course something that affects all of us personally, but certainly if you were a CEO of a health system, it costs you millions of dollars with delays in care and lack of billing. So I think it's a rare area we can find win-win wins.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, it's also a company that AI, that's a hot space right now in healthcare but before we move onto the technology parts of what you do, you're a physician, you're a practicing physician. So why did you start out as a physician? What inspired you to begin that career trajectory?

Dr. YiDing Yu:

I was one of those little girls who thought I was going to be a doctor when I was in kindergarten. And to take that and to how much thought went into that when I was really little. And then over time, I was always a math and science person, so it just seemed to continually naturally fit. I think actually when you get into college and you actually have to make a career decision and the first time you have to put that pen to paper, at the end of the day, I realized that I just loved helping people.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

And I wanted to make sure that my career was fulfilling in its own right. I didn't want to feel that I was doing something but then I would find fulfillment in other parts of my life. Of course, I find fulfillment in other parts of my life, but that's not at the expense of sacrificing myself for a job that I feel like I toil away at. So it was critically important to me to say I love what I do every day. I want to feel that what I do is meaningful.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

And then I also knew very early on in my career, I was an economics major, for example, in college. And so I always thought about things in a system. I wanted to be able to help the person in front of me, but also how are the things that I'm doing or that I'm discovering able to help the doctor in Kansas?

Dr. YiDing Yu:

And as an individual physician, you only have limited ways that you can do that but if you become a systems operator, if you become an innovator, you can develop solutions that are then used by everyone. And that means that your impact is so much broader and that's always something that's really motivated me and excited me and drove me to this career path.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, having a vision of being a physician from kindergarten, you certainly fulfilled that vision. You're a serial entrepreneur, you're an innovator; I didn't realize you were also an economics major. So you're obviously many things and more than one thing all at the same time. So you've also talked about yourself as being an accidental entrepreneur. Tell us what that means?

Dr. YiDing Yu:

Yeah. As I was mentioning, I have thought of myself as maybe, that I would become a doctor and then eventually, maybe, take leadership roles, maybe run a health system, maybe I'd be involved in health policy. I think very often, we're very influenced by what type of mentors or role models we see.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

And so when you're going through college and medical school, you see a lot of academics, you see other leaders. And I didn't really see a lot of physician entrepreneurs. And so that was clearly not what I had planned to do. But I've also been a person who wants to take most of the opportunities around her. And so when I was a second year resident, actually, at the Brigham and Women's Hospital, the organization had just launched a new innovation organization and they were going to host their first hackathon.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

And I thought, "I have a little bit of time in my busy schedule, this sounds really cool, I should just check it out. Let me just check it out." And it was the first ever hackathon I went to. I had no idea what to expect but ended up putting together a team and we thought of the idea of Twiage because at the time, which was actually unbelievably still very much the case across the country, radios are the standard of care for communication between an ambulance and a hospital.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

And it's public radio and so anybody can tap into it. And so Laurie, if I were in an ambulance, I can't say your name, I can't give the doctors at a hospital any identifying information about you. And to me, as a physician at the time, I thought that was ludicrous. My Uber driver knows more about me than the doctor who's waiting at the hospital for a heart-attack.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

So that just became the impetus for that first idea of Twiage. And I thought, "What the heck, let me see how far that can go." And that's how I became this accidental entrepreneur. I made a ton of mistakes, had no idea what I was doing and somehow, I got to the other side and still in one piece, but it's definitely set me on this road of a very different career path that I had even imagined.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, it also sounds a bit unbelievable. I'm just going to say that, "I had a little bit of extra time as I was a physician." Clearly, you have a passion for your work, you have so many accolades to your name: Woman Entrepreneur of the Year, Becker's 50 Under 40, Boston Business 40 Under 40. So you have innovation award and accolade after accolade. Where is that passion coming from?

Laurie McGraw:

It doesn't sound like just a little bit of curiosity and stumbling onto the right problem. It sounds like a little bit more than that to me. So maybe give us some more insight.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

I would say that I care a great deal about what I'm doing and I work hard, but I also think that those are qualities that exist in so many people. But it really becomes synergistic or explosive when what you're good at and what you work hard at is also something that you're critically passionate about.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

It all comes together. So that it becomes actually natural and easy, right? So when you're building a company with an idea that you think would be dumb that the world doesn't have it, or if you are building a team at a company and you can see how much that team or that product can do for the rest of the world, it's just natural to put all of your energy into that but then also find it really rewarding.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

And at the end of the day, all of those accolades just become a byproduct of being recognized for doing great work. But I actually think that what a lot of people miss in their career path is finding that perfect alignment. Because you might actually find an amazingly well-paid job that possibly you can do well in but that doesn't give you that fire in your belly to take it to the next level.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

But when you do, when you find a job that you're perfectly fit for, you are deeply passionate about and rewards you for your hard work, everything seems to come naturally at that point. I'd also say, it's almost like finding the right relationship, right?

Dr. YiDing Yu:

You can have good people and then not be a good fit, but when you find the right partner for you, it's really magical and everything else comes more easily. And I think that's my advice for other women looking into careers that it takes hard work to find the right path. And it takes thoughtfulness and it takes being engaging and having vulnerable conversations but the work is so meaningful because at the end of the day, you benefit the most.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, passion and hard work are common ingredients for very successful women like you. At the same time, being a younger women, being a significant leader at a significant company today but a CEO at other companies at a younger age, there aren't necessarily a lot of people that look like you, or are of that age in a high tech kind of field.

Laurie McGraw:

So just to talk about something maybe a little bit more difficult. There's a lot of public play right now about the difficult shootings in Atlanta and just curious in terms of issues that you have faced, as an Asian woman, as a CEO, as a C-suite executive, just being in that kind of spot. Have you had those types of things where it hasn't always been easy and you've experienced some of those difficulties along the way?

Dr. YiDing Yu:

Yeah. What is so true is that it doesn't matter. All the privileges that you might have earned for yourself, it doesn't matter what my position is or what colleges I've gone to or what awards I have, we are all just citizens in this community.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

And so how somebody looks at me or how somebody treats me on the street or in other environments is absolutely tainted by things like racism and prejudice. And I grew up in the United States and I would say that I've benefited so much from the American dream in this country. But absolutely, I've seen or experienced direct racism, whether it was intentionally hostile or rooted in ignorance.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

Because I think a lot of microaggressions or racism truly come from ignorance, as opposed to direct hatred, but clearly we're seeing now that plenty of people are motivated directly by hate. And there is very little I can say about that, other than that is awful and we all need to join together in condemning all forms of that, whether it's Asians, to blacks, to transgender, to women, to any group that's just absolutely unacceptable.

Laurie McGraw:

But how have you dealt with it? So in those experiences, where again, you've got a degree from Harvard, you are as accomplished as you are. In the moment, how do you deal with it in a way that allows you to continue to progress in terms of the aspirations or whatever you're trying to work on? What are the type of things that you either ask people to stop doing or want people to start doing so that both you can continue to move forward on initiatives that you're trying to drive or just make way for others?

Dr. YiDing Yu:

I think that it's so important. So thanks for asking the question. I'd say there's a couple of things that I do. Number one, I think the first thing is what you have to do for yourself, which is that when you're in an environment, when somebody challenges you, when somebody questions your intelligence or questions your qualifications, when you should be clearly qualified as the next person, I think it can have such a detrimental effect on your own self-confidence.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

And I definitely experienced it. And you can walk in a room and present to a room full of investors; most of them tend to be white men. And if they challenge you, they ask you questions as if you were less intelligent than who you are, challenge your ability to actually know your market that you know well. I think many people walk out of those situations feeling beat down.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

And I think, of course, they would. And I think the first thing that I do in those moments is to brace myself; is to actually tell myself, "What's going on?" and to not allow myself to feel beaten down because once you start to believe it, once you start internalizing it, there's no way that you can act your best.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

So I think that's step one, you have to both shield yourself and realize what's happening. And then how I respond to folks really varies. I think it depends on the psychological safety of the situation. There are times where sure, you can call folks out but you might be in a panel or in a situation where everybody has more power than you have.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

That's really intimidating. When you think about all forms of harassment or others, it's a power dynamic. And so if you don't feel comfortable speaking out or calling out, you don't necessarily need to do that at that moment. Some people feel comfortable. You have to feel comfortable. And I will say, absolutely, there's been times where I know what's going on, I can see what's going on and I grit my teeth and I finish the conversation because I don't feel comfortable calling this person, who is so influential in this community, or so important and I don't have the safe space to be able to make that.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

That said, even in times when that has happened, I think very much I don't want to work with people or engage with people who are like that. And so I very intentionally say, "Yeah, I'm not going to work with toxic people. I'm not going to work with people who can't see the value of who I am. And I choose to not work with them."

Dr. YiDing Yu:

But also, I think speak about it with others in the community and talk about my experiences because I don't want to suffer in silence. And I try not to. And I think, Laurie, in other situations, there's going to be situations where it's not necessarily hostile, but it's again, that kind of ignorant comment that might be made towards you, whether it's about your gender or about your race.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

And it's from a colleague and for those, I think those are for me, opportunities for education. And depending on the scenario, oftentimes, I might pull that person aside and tell them how I felt about that, why their words affected me that way and that here's what have been more helpful,

here's some ways that you could improve this. And frankly, some of that has been... Women, for example, are much more likely to be interrupted in a meeting than men.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

And I have certainly, being an executive, noticed that despite the fact that I have a C-suite title, that I am continuously interrupted by some members of the team and usually, they're men. And when that really becomes a problem, at some point, I just call out that, "Well, before you interrupted me," I just call out the activity. So that they get a little bit of a reminder.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

But I will talk to them and say, "I've been noticing that when I'm speaking, you continue to interrupt me and I really would appreciate that you don't." And I think being able to have those conversations with your colleagues is important and I try to advance that.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, there's so many pieces of advice in there, as well as thoughtful comments, and I also like how you pulled out the power dynamic that often comes in some of those conversations, and by being able to recognize something as a power dynamic which always has influence over women's confidence, in particular, is something we talk about all the time, that those are just some things that can help you to get the right mindset to deal with things in the moment.

Laurie McGraw:

A couple more things, YiDing, that I just wanted to touch on. You have a lot of time, it seems, to do humanitarian efforts and give back. I don't know where you find all this time but you've done this over the course of your career. What's important about that to you? Why do you spend extra time that I know you don't have, to do things like give back, whether it's tutoring those in prison, whether it's doing Doctors Without Borders, those types of things?

Dr. YiDing Yu:

It's part of this whole ethos of making sure that what I do with my time in my life is incredibly fulfilling. And over the course of my life, I have found activities, for example, like prison tutoring which I started in college, or working on issues affecting Myanmar and the Burmese people, is just things that provide that extra depth that who cares what I did today at work? Yes, that advanced the business for my company but there are people who have far less than I have and who I can still learn a great deal from.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

So that's really important. I try to wrap that up in everything that we do. Even at Olive, one of the things we sit on now nearly a petabyte of data, which is a huge amount of healthcare data, and we chose because we believe in giving back, to look at that data for Women's History Month. And we looked at breast cancer data to understand if, especially, during COVID, was there any impact to women's breast cancer screening?

Dr. YiDing Yu:

And part of that where we realized that breast MRIs, which are part of the gold standard screenings for women with high risk of breast cancer, they're denied by insurance about 13.5% of the time. That's four and a half times more than for mammograms and we're calling on further research. We're not a breast cancer company; this is not necessarily our space but when you see a problem, we're all citizens of this world, we have to call it out.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

We have to say, "This doesn't look right," and women shouldn't be at risk of not getting the right breast cancer screening simply because of an insurance issue. So it's examples like that. I think we can all find ways to give back, whether it's in your work or outside of work, I think it's all part of what we should do. I certainly feel really strongly about that.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, you're clearly bringing that both to your outside life, as well as into your important work today. So that's just wonderful. As we close out here, YiDing, the thing I'd like to know about you've said I've read a quote from you, I thought this was fantastic that, "Success was never a straight path, it was always a winding road. And I've had my share of failures."

Laurie McGraw:

It doesn't sound like to me. That said, how would you think about your career progression? Whether it's mentors or role models or just what you think about generally in terms of what you're aspiring to do?

Dr. YiDing Yu:

I would stick by that quote any day. Because I always tell other folks, what you see on my bio is the highlight reel. It's like the Instagram of my career and you don't see all the times that I've made a mistake or I've not gotten the job I wanted or absolutely messed up.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

And the truth is I don't want bios like mine or careers like mine to feel unattainable because I don't think that's true. I think, in fact, not everybody can be as lucky as I have been but that it's not something that just, she had this perfect ride up and a perfect career trajectory.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

And frankly, in my life, that's actually been very reassuring. When I see that from others, I'm like, "Oh, great. Okay. You don't have to have everything figured out." And I think that's true as adults. You grew up thinking you need to have everything figured out but you don't. Becoming an adult doesn't magically endow you with more wisdom, which is why we need those mentors and champions and sponsors in our life.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

And I think of mentors as the collection of individuals who I seek for advice but also just for their opinion. It's not necessarily that they have to be this wise person that just shares all these



resources with you. I think that's a lot to ask of any individual mentor and if you have one, amazing.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

But frankly, I reach out to mentors to... some help me with salary negotiations because they're very good at that, some help me with thinking about how to negotiate a deal. Others help me with work-life balance because that's a real value there. So it really is about building a collection of people who you draw wisdom from. I think it's much more that bidirectional relationship than rather a one-directional relationship and if you do that well, and you cultivate that for most of your career, you'll go really far because they help ground you and they help guide you and help you better visualize the path forward.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, I think that that is just fantastic advice to close out on in terms of having just a collection of mentors and people to give you advice along the way, and I'll be looking for some of those failures because I haven't heard of one yet in this conversation. This has been a terrific, Inspiring Women conversation with Dr. YiDing Yu of Olive. Thank you so very much for being here today.

Dr. YiDing Yu:

Thank you very much.

Laurie McGraw:

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