

Inspiring Women

Episode 43: Dr. Renee Bovellev

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 come to learn one thing. Women need women, and not just any women, but inspiring women.

Laurie McGraw:

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Laurie McGraw:

Thanks for listening, and I hope you will be inspired.

Laurie McGraw:

In today's episode of Inspiring Women, we are speaking with Dr. Renee Bovellev and I am so excited about this. Dr. Bovellev is the owner and Medical Director of Envision Eye & Laser Center in Maryland, and she's a board-certified ophthalmologist, who graduated from Wesley, and there she studied African-American Black studies and psychology. She did her medical school at UCLA, her residency at Yale, and she did a fellowship at LSU.

Laurie McGraw:

But in addition to all of that, she also has a Master's Degree in Cybersecurity Strategy and Information Management from George Washington. Now, Renee has academic appointments at Howard University and several other organizations, and she also is a recognized expert in her work in cybersecurity and information management, both developing education courses, delivering many lectures, writing articles, and the like.

Laurie McGraw:

She also has leadership positions in locally and nationally-recognized ophthalmologic and medical associations, and recently Renee was recognized as an outstanding female leader in ophthalmology.

Laurie McGraw:

Dr. Bovellev, I'm so happy to have you on Inspiring Women.

Dr. Renee Bovellev:

Thank you so much, Laurie. I really appreciate that gracious introduction. Thank you.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, this is a great day to be having this conversation. Today is the first recognized federal holiday of Juneteenth. I think we can all celebrate that, and why don't we start as we always do in Inspiring Women with what are you doing right now, professionally? What does your day-to-day career look like?

Dr. Renee Bovelle:

Well, day-to-day, I am a businesswoman running my practice, Envision Eye & Laser. I'm seeing patients, and additionally, I see patients with the residents at Howard, and I also am able to teach medical students and family medicine residents, through Ross University as well. Also ... there's more-

Laurie McGraw:

There's so much more, there's so much more.

Dr. Renee Bovelle:

And I enjoy all of that. Seeing my patients is very rewarding, as is working with the residents, but I also am rewarded because I'm able to be a part of advocacy, and I do that through the Maryland Society of Eye Physicians. I'm the current president, and so we advocate through policy and through education, to help keep Marylanders' eyes safe, and we do that by talking with legislators and also directly to the public.

Dr. Renee Bovelle:

And I'm also privileged to be a member of MedChi, which does a similar task, but for the whole house of medicine.

Laurie McGraw:

Renee, your story in terms of your path to medicine, and then, not just your work and effort in organized medicine, but also other things beyond that ... cybersecurity, which I'll want to talk a little bit about ... what was your path to get there? Was this always, I wanted to be a physician?

Laurie McGraw:

I think of being a physician as an enormous investment of time, energy, and while you both run a practice, you do all of these other things, but the path to medicine, how did that happen? Was that an expectation of you? Did you want to do this from the beginning? Just give us a sense for that.

Dr. Renee Bovelle:

Sure. I grew up in Washington DC, and when I grew up, I was able to see my parents' friends and neighbors doing all kinds of things. Now that may not be the case with a lot of people, especially African-Americans, but for me it was, and I'm privileged, and happy to say that I had that. So I grew up around educators. My father was a social scientist and professor. I grew up among psychologists. My friends' parents were doctors and lawyers and the like, so it was always an expectation that I was going to go to college, and when we were growing up, people always said, what did you want to be when you grew up?

Dr. Renee Bovelle:

Well, I was a child of TV, and I remember I used to like to watch the TV show, That Girl, if anyone remembers that. I'm sure [crosstalk 00:05:14]-

Laurie McGraw:
I remember that.

Dr. Renee Bovelle:

... with Marlo Thomas, and I loved that show. And then there was another show called Emergency, with ... I think his name was Richard Mantooth, something like that ... and I liked both of those shows.

Dr. Renee Bovelle:

So when people would ask me, I either wanted to be that girl, or I wanted to be a paramedic, and one day at a dinner party, I told somebody I wanted to be a paramedic, and she was a grandmotherly type, one of my parents' friends, and she says, "You know, you could be a paramedic, which is great. But if you want, you can also be a doctor, and do everything. Do the most," and ever since after that, I wanted to be a doctor. And that was probably when I was around six or seven years old.

Dr. Renee Bovelle:

Ever since then, since I had it in my mind that I wanted to be a doctor, I found science exciting. I remember in sixth grade, one of the teachers dissected a frog and showed us how the leg muscle jumps when he pulled on the nerve, things like that. It was very interesting. So ever since then, I always knew that I wanted to be a doctor.

Laurie McGraw:

Renee, you also, in things I've read about you, I understand that your parents expected of you, actually greatness, and what I saw was that that greatness was a great contributor to society. So how did that expectation shape your entrance into being a physician, but then going on to do organized medicine, running a business, cybersecurity, those additional things that you do?

Dr. Renee Bovelle:

Sure. I grew up in Washington DC, and I had a wonderful childhood. My parents instilled in us core values. They let us know how important integrity is, perseverance and, of course, there was discipline too. We had to do chores growing up, and we did things as a family, and I think that our parents didn't really say these words all the time about core values, but they demonstrated them. They let us know how important putting yourself into your work, into the things that you do, means a lot, sometimes more than money. So we always made homemade gifts and things like that. It was really, really fun. My mom would take time with us in the summers, and we would do wonderful art projects, so we had a balance, and I think that has led me to try to incorporate those core values even now into adulthood.

Laurie McGraw:

I imagine that is very rewarding, and so you're coming from a background where you have a family that has expectations of you, in terms of what you need to contribute to society. You have other people who are helping you, and that's wonderful, but it also is true that there's a uniqueness about being an African-American female physician, an ophthalmologist, and so the statistics, the demographics are, that you are one of few who fit those demographics.

Laurie McGraw:

So what is that like in terms of having the expectations, but that also just facing the being the one, or one of few, in terms of having the network to bring you along or work with? What did you face? How did you break through this, or did you even notice that uniqueness? Was it something that was with you day-to-day?

Dr. Renee Bovellev:

That's an interesting question. I do recognize that I am unique, probably the only Black female ophthalmologist that also has a degree in cybersecurity. It does come up, especially when I'm in my own practice, it's one thing. But when I have to deal with the larger society, it's a little bit different.

Dr. Renee Bovellev:

When I have a patient that is moving, and I am looking for someone to refer that patient to, and they request an African-American ophthalmologist, and I go to Google and try to do a search, and I can't find one. And this is if they're moving to another state, Florida or North Carolina or Louisiana, different places, people move all the time. And then I realize, wow, living in the DC Metro area and pretty much being one or two people removed probably from all of the African-American ophthalmologists in the country is daunting.

Laurie McGraw:

When I speak to women, Renee, like you who are just breaking new grounds, where you're one of few, or one of one, at the table, the only female at the table, kind of things, sometimes I hear from women that they have different expectations of themselves. They have to be more prepared. They have to work harder.

Laurie McGraw:

Do you have different expectations of yourself being in that unique position?

Dr. Renee Bovellev:

No, I don't have different expectations. What I have learned, and what I do have to keep telling myself, is not to compare myself to anyone else, and I think that in some ways, social media is great. We're able to share experiences like what you're doing now, but a lot of times on Facebook and all of the other social media outlets, everyone's life looks perfect, and even when you go to meetings, people say, "Oh, I'm doing this. I'm doing that," and that's false because I also have to remind myself, everybody has some trials and tribulations along the way. And what I do when I get caught in what they call the imposter syndrome, or sometimes if I'm feeling less than, I retreat into myself and I talk to myself and I tell myself, "Okay, Renee, if I'm having trouble today, I have a handful of people I can reach out to," and I know they have my best interest at heart and I will talk to them, or I will sometimes talk to myself and I will try to figure out how I'm going to get out of that situation.

Dr. Renee Bovellev:

But I really try hard not to compare myself to another person because, another thing that my mom always told me. There are always going to be people who are doing better than you, and there are always going to be people that aren't doing as well as you, so you can always strive for the top, but don't compare yourself, because you never know what's going on in that person's life. So I tell myself those kind of things when I'm in a difficult time.

Laurie McGraw:

That is such a terrific comment, because I think the recognition of feeling less than, is something we can all relate to. We've been in those circumstances. So many women have been in those circumstances in one way or another, but then to recognize it, and not to get into that vicious cycle of self-doubt, imposter syndrome ... you're naming things, terms, that I think many people are familiar with, but recognizing them, and then also not succumbing to, just the negativity that comes with those feelings. That is just really excellent advice, Renee, and it's great that you recognize that when it happens to even you.

Laurie McGraw:

But if being a physician was not enough, if being a leader in organized medicine was not enough, if owning your practice and being a businesswoman was not enough, you also have taken an interest and have become more of an authority in the area of cybersecurity. So where did that come from? AI? All of these new technologies that are becoming available, is something that you have a master's in and you're teaching on. Why is it an interest? What sparked that?

Dr. Renee Bovelle:

Well, I was curious about it. The reason why I was curious is because your listeners may remember some years ago with HIPAA, we were told we had to do risk assessments. These terms, compliance, risk assessments, and privacy, all of those terms to me several years ago were like a cure for insomnia, okay? They really were.

Dr. Renee Bovelle:

And for most physicians, because as physicians, what are we focused on? We are focused on saving life, improving the quality of life, and with me as an ophthalmologist, it's saving and preserving and restoring vision. That is my interest. So when I was told I had to do this, it was very onerous, and I was very irritated that I had to do this and pay for it, pay to get this done. So I had a cybersecurity expert, and the expert came and did my risk assessment, and I hadn't done on a weekend and I was doing my work, and I was like, "Okay, I'm done."

Dr. Renee Bovelle:

And then the next year it had to be done again. I was like, "Oh brother, didn't I do this last year? Why do I have to do this again?" I was very irritated. Had to pay more money again. So the expert asked if he could hack into my system, and I didn't even know at that time, what that meant. I was like, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, can I do this?" I said, sure.

Dr. Renee Bovelle:

So he was outside and I was in my office, and we were talking on the phone. He said, "Go to a website, any website." So I went to a website, let's say it was CNN. I went to CNN and he told me, "Okay, now you're on CNN," and then I was like, "How does he know that?" And then I went to another website and he says, "Oh, now you're on ... I don't know ... Sears," and then I said, "Well, let me try a website that has a password," and I tried that. And he said, "Okay, now you're on this website," and when I realized that anybody could do that, and get access to my patient information, credit card information, things like that, that was alarming to me, and I wanted to learn more. I wanted to understand it, and then several years later ... I was reading up on it, and then several years later, I decided to get a master's degree.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, it's great that you did, because the issue is a large one. It's only becoming larger, and the level of just threats and things like that, people do need to learn more about it, and generally speaking, the field of medicine is less prepared than they should be in this area. But Renee, as you're learning ... so what I'm hearing is, you get irritated, so you decide to become expert in that area, and pursue a different degree. So that's kind of an interesting approach for dealing with irritation.

Laurie McGraw:

How do you deal with the issue of burnout and balance? Certainly in just physicians as a workforce, burnout is a more significant issue, and people know this, particularly in this year of the pandemic. How do you deal with burnout, because you're not just being a physician?

Dr. Renee Bovelle:

Laurie, like many of your listeners, I'm hardworking. I push myself, sometimes to the limit. Sometimes I overdo it. So now I try to consciously recognize that it's important to take a breather, and usually every day I try to appreciate nature, and that really relaxes me. Sometimes it may be as I'm driving home, and sometimes I'm driving home, I'm looking at the sunset, and I think how wonderful is that. I, several years ago, went on a vacation to Key West, and there, every day, they clap and celebrate the sunset. So I've tried to incorporate that. At least look at the sunset, and if I miss the sunset, and I'm at home, and I get a chance to look at the moon, then I try to look at the moon and celebrate that, and get the serenity that comes from the moon. Or sometimes I'll just look outside even, and appreciate nature, looking at the trees, but I try to find some solace in nature.

Dr. Renee Bovelle:

Additionally, I also find balance in different organizations. There's a organization called Ophthalmic World Leaders. That organization really helps me get outside of the everyday challenge of seeing patients and saving vision and working on cybersecurity. What that organization does, it allows me to really work on networking, and working with industry leaders, my colleagues, on leadership and diversity. And those are two of my favorite topics, and I feel that I get rejuvenated when I work with those people, because I'm able to do two things that are, I guess, my avocation, actually. I get a chance to mentor and help bring up the next generation and listen to them, and honestly, I feel like I learn from the next generation. I find that mentoring actually helps me. In some ways, maybe I get a little more out of it than what I give. I don't know, but I would suggest to your listeners, that working in an organization like that, you may get more out of it that you realize, so finding something else, it may seem like it's a lot of effort to do something more, but sometimes it gives you a greater reward.

Laurie McGraw:

Renee, your passion for the work that you do, but also giving yourself the permission to take that time off and do the reset, is fantastic advice. There's so many things that you have your hands in, are leading on. I really appreciate this conversation. Renee, as we close out today's episode of Inspiring Women, what is some last advice you might want to give to listeners?

Dr. Renee Bovelle:

I would like to tell listeners that it's important to find your passion, and people talk about that all the time, and the reason why, is because when you have those burnout days or when you're approaching that, that's what's going to keep you going, something that you're excited about. And one thing that you

may want to consider, is maybe not looking at social media all the time, but become a little bit introspective, and think about what excites you. You don't want to think about what excites somebody else, because that can confuse you, but if you think about what excites you, and then go for that, that's important.

Dr. Renee Bovelle:

The other thing that I think is equally important, is to give back. None of us got here on our own, and we all need to be supported. I have friends that support me all the time, and giving back via organizations like I do, is one way, or mentoring is another way, but I would say giving back is extremely important, and it'll make you feel better and it'll keep you motivated-

Laurie McGraw:

And recharge you. This has been such an excellent Inspiring Women conversation. I've been speaking with Dr. Renee Bovelle, who is an ophthalmologist, a businesswoman, a leader, a cybersecurity expert, and Renee, thank you so much.

Dr. Renee Bovelle:

My pleasure.

Laurie McGraw:

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