



# Dicus Award Winner's Speech

*The following is Angela Wilson Pennisi's Robert G. Dicus Award speech from the 2022 APTA Private Practice Annual Conference in Aurora, Colorado.*

BEING NOMINATED FOR, LET ALONE RECEIVING, THIS award is a humbling invitation to pause and reflect. To my friends and colleagues here, don't you know that every success I've had started from so many of you? The ideas and resources that you have generously shared over the years, and the open ears as we've shared our thoughts and concerns have resulted in treasured connections. Thank you for your friendship and walking this path with me. The debt that we owe to Robert Dicus, Charles Magistro, and Jim McKillip in founding this Section — could they imagine the abundance of gifts this community would develop almost 70 years ago?

To the board, the awards committee and my nominators, a heartfelt "thank you"; and especially to Theresa Marko who brought my name forward. Reviewing the letters of support written on my behalf brought me much joy. There are few gifts greater than to be recognized by people you respect and admire so much — I will share that I noticed the word most repeated in describing my leadership style was "calm," so I've asked them to bring around some warm milk; we'll let you settle in with your blankies, and I'll share a little bedtime story.

Many of you know that I grew up in Nebraska. Talking about yourself and your accomplishments is anathema to this upbringing (as well as any use of a word like anathema when certainly another word would do just fine), but as I spoke with recipients of this award, several suggested that I share my story with the hope that others might find it helpful in some way. I'm so blessed to have an abundance of parents here tonight; Mom and Dan, Dad, who all influenced me in their own ways. I love you and thank you for making the trip for this special night. You know, when my own children were growing up, we heard about helicopter parents, now progressing to lawnmower parents, mowing down all obstacles in the paths of their children. I believe that my parents would be proud to tell you that they were neither helicopters nor lawnmowers. But, what I did learn from my parents is not to wait for things to be perfect, to make the most of what you have been given and that you have the ability to bloom where you are planted.

We moved a good bit when I was young, and I attended four different grade schools growing up. During this time, I could frequently be found with my nose in a book, which allowed me to experience a wider world and helped facilitate

my success academically. Even today, one of my greatest self-care strategies is losing myself in a book, even if just for a few minutes at a time. As I entered high school, I was lucky enough to reunite with a group of smart girls I knew at one of those elementary schools. These women not only normalized my nerdiness, but their wicked sharp senses of humor also helped ensure I had a personality. I was learning to bloom where I was planted.

As the first in my family to attend college, I selected the University of Nebraska because it was economical, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, and they had many choices of majors. I got my money's worth and changed majors at least three times! After taking a year off between my freshman and sophomore year in which I worked and traveled as a nanny to a family in San Francisco, I was prepared to focus on pursuing a future as a physical therapist. By managing to graduate in three and a half years, while working my way through school, my efforts were adequate to gain me admission to Columbia University's physical therapy program. Now, Columbia is not known as an economical education choice, but by promising two years to the New York City Board of Education after I graduated, the Ivy League was within reach.

I was placed at PS 156 in the South Bronx for my first year out of physical therapy school as the only physical therapist on site. What can I say about PS 156's mentorship program? Well, I learned how to keep my wits about me on the walk from the train

each day. And I learned to rely on myself, my education, and natural inquisitiveness to navigate a multicultural, bureaucratic, and hierarchical workplace that today's new professionals would not hesitate to label "toxic." While I knew I would pursue a career in orthopedics after completing my commitment to the school system, I had no intention of wasting those two years. I spent my lunch breaks and the time I would have spent around the watercooler with

my non-existent coworkers drawing full anatomy diagrams on the chalkboards to keep my knowledge fresh and to share with my young patients. I didn't know much about treating children, but I knew outcome measures were important and administered the School Function Assessment for every one of my students, so I could prioritize which skills to work on with them. I identified members the staff with whom I could align and advocate for physical therapy services

and my students in a system in which I had no status or influence. And three days a week, I would end the school day and complete an afternoon/evening shift at an orthopedic, sports and performing arts clinic on the Upper West Side of Manhattan so I could build my skills for the future.

PS 156 is where I met Rosalynn, a smart, charming third grader with diplegic cerebral palsy who was cared for by her grandmother. I was a very idealistic young therapist and believed in Rosalynn's potential to bloom, even at PS 156 with a therapist as underwhelming as I was, and I did my best to help make that happen.

The movie *Titanic* was a phenomenon during this time, and in an effort to make therapy more fun (and since I didn't know what I was doing anyway), I taught her and some of my other students a choreographed routine, focusing on motor control, flexibility and balance, to *My Heart Will Go On* by Celine Dion. Do you remember how the song goes? — Do you need me to sing a few bars to jog your memory?

As my time with PS 156 ended, my husband Chad and I — not waiting until things were perfect to move on with business of life — started our family, and moved to Chicago, where I was able to obtain a position in a suburban hospital outpatient orthopedics department in the nonexistent job market following passage of the Balanced Budget Act in 1995. I remember being so disappointed that a single piece of legislation could affect my career and livelihood to such a profound level, and a future advocate was born.

I also remember some disappointment after finally starting what I was expecting to be my dream job. I mean, I had 10 more minutes with every patient than I had in my ortho job in New York City in a spacious beautiful facility with plenty of equipment. I would leave my newborn son Calvin and treat 19 patients before returning home, each one having asked me, "Who is taking care of your baby?" Every day. Having somehow managed to pick up some clinical skills in that part-time

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job from the therapists whose patients were the dancers of the New York City and Joffrey Ballets, and the students of the Julliard School, no one ever canceled. And while I hadn't expected to bloom at PS 156, what I learned about movement and development as a pediatric therapist has informed my understanding of dysfunctional movement in orthopedic and chronic pain patients ever since.

There was this one therapist I spoke with during this time whom I had gotten to know when I lived in New York City who had a private practice and encouraged me to join the Private Practice Section. And the rest is history. Carol Stillman is still one of my closest friends and greatest cheerleaders. Ask her sometime to tell you the story of how we met.

So, though my little family lived in a one-bedroom apartment, with a little naivete and a lot of bluster, while remembering to not wait until things were perfect before taking the next step, I opened a private practice. In Chicago. Where I did not know a single physician and we did not have real direct access. In the middle of practically the birthplace of large scale, multi-site practices. And yet, I figured out how to bloom.

It took four years before I could support myself with that practice and before I had a single staff member. I also practiced part-time in nearly every possible environment, in every neighborhood and with nearly every patient population in Chicago during that time. And because it had all been working out so well so far — we were finally able to upgrade to a two-bedroom apartment — we went ahead and completed our family with Walker. I'm so blessed to have Calvin and Walker here to help me celebrate this evening. I know I was different kind of mom. I'd always hoped different in a good way, but the truth is that as a parent you don't have any idea if you are "doing it right" until after many years, but I'm so proud of the men Calvin and Walker have become, I love you so much, and I can't wait to see the ways in which you continue to bloom. I hope that a parent who needs it tonight has an opportunity to meet you and feel just a moment of reassurance that the hard work of juggling a practice and parenting can also yield some really spectacular human beings.

Twenty-two years and three locations later, surrounded by an amazing team of people, sometimes I'm not sure how I have done this. I didn't set out to be named a leader or ever think I would follow in the footsteps of the founders of the section or the esteemed recipients of this award who have gone before me. There was no master plan for this garden. I have as many faults as anyone — I can be impatient. I am easily disappointed. I've been known to curse like a sailor. I've had patients I've failed. But, I've always contributed simply because I could, and it didn't seem right to not make the effort for a better practice, a better profession, a better community and a better world.

I think many of us are guilty of underestimating the impact of what we have to offer, or we perceive service as a sacrifice. For me, service has instead provided the nourishment to sustain me. Never has this been the case more than during the first months of the pandemic. I know you are all the beneficiaries of the work of the COVID Advisory Committee — a group of volunteers who pulled together,

laser-focused our efforts on a few key objectives and achieved — all of them. With APTA, we achieved payment for telehealth services during the public health emergency that many of us were offering to our communities for free or minimal cost to ensure our patients received critical services. We influenced the

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guidelines for safely reopening practices while helping ensure that our small business members could realistically operate. We helped give our members the knowledge they needed to apply for business-saving grants and loans.

And we supported each other. Do not deprive yourself of this gift of serving others. Consider the ways in which service is not depleting, but instead replenishing. What if we operated at the level of the COVID Advisory Committee on just one initiative a year? What if 100 people contributed at one-tenth of that level instead of just 25 people meeting day and night during one of the most challenging periods of their personal and professional lives? Where would we be as a profession? Where would the health of our communities be? In my experience, the barriers the world presents us with are nothing compared to the barriers erected in our own minds. Sometimes an obstacle viewed from another perspective is quite honestly an opportunity that another with greater advantages than you may not be prepared to identify at all. Every obstacle that we overcome prepares us for the next success. Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius' words that, "The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way," have been demonstrated many times through history from Rockefeller to Eisenhower, to the work we do every day.

Yes, the last few years have been hard on us. It's been painful to see our staff members struggle to find their paths, which too many times this year has meant leaving us, their colleagues and patients behind. My hope is that they carry forward and bloom in the profession with a seed planted during their time with us. But as we emerge and recover, where might the capacity we have gained from overcoming these obstacles take us in our practices and as a profession?

We are frequently frustrated that we aren't recognized and compensated as primary musculoskeletal care providers. In our practice, we have decided not to wait to be invited to fill this role. We have simply started doing it, demonstrating the value to our patients and physician colleagues, changing how they interact with us, and finding a way to bloom. We take those blood pressures, we assess physical activity status as a vital sign, screen for health risk factors that can be modified through physical activity and help patients overcome the barriers to addressing them. We assess for height loss and screen for osteoporotic fracture in female patients over age 50. Not only do we report this data, but we provide context including ranges and norms, just like a physician sees on a lab report. We set goals grounded in principles for behavior change and educate patients about what they can do to change their own health destinies through physical activity. These things may not all happen on the first visit, but as physical therapists we are blessed with an entire episode of care to influence our patients. Taking two minutes out of just a few of those visits over the course of the episode of care could significantly advance how we are perceived by our patients, the public, and our colleagues. Don't wait for things to be perfect. Don't wait for someone to invite you. Demonstrate your worth and bloom.

Planting and nurturing these seeds in our practices and our profession is not easy, but the abundance and beauty of the garden will ultimately reflect our efforts. We all have our dry spells. Words of encouragement have frequently been the light and water allowing me to bloom through challenges. And too many times to count over the years, my husband Chad provided those words, believing in me on dark days when I didn't believe in myself or I wanted to quit. Thank you. I love you. The person you choose to spend your life with is one of the most important decisions that you will make. Whether I was wise beyond my years when I married Chad Pennisi 27 years ago, or just lucky, it has made all the difference.

Rarely do we have the opportunity to understand the power in our words of encouragement. Remember Rosalynn, interpretive dancer to the theme to *Titanic*? We loosely stayed in touch and eventually reconnected on LinkedIn more than 15 years later. She was in my thoughts on July 28, 2016, when the first woman accepted a major party's nomination for President of the United States, and I sent her a quick message about how seeing barriers overcome reminded me that when she was my student that I was convinced that because of her abilities and talents that, "she could be our first modern day president with a physical limitation." She thanked me, and I didn't give it another thought. Until five years later when she wrote me that she wanted me to know that the words I had shared stayed with

her and had inspired her to persist and pursue her dream of becoming a published poet. You see Rosalynn is blooming. She graduated from college, works as a family advocate to re-unify broken families, and shares her writing as a spoken word artist.

Your true and earnest words of encouragement are never wasted and may make all the difference in someone's ability to bloom. Share them generously. Thank those who have encouraged you, as you may not always have another opportunity. Seek to understand others before seeking to be understood, and you will build the relationships that will sustain you.

Our dreams for ourselves and our profession can be overwhelming when we try to figure out the next step. I have always worked to focus on that which is in my control, which is usually more than I think, execute flawlessly on the fundamentals and be just 1 degree better every day. I mean, at a rate of improvement of 1 percent at a time, even the latest bloomer will eventually reach 100%! Executing flawlessly on the fundamentals is not exciting. You won't be interviewed in a magazine or on television. Working hard never guarantees our ability to overcome adversity, and yet, by failing to apply ourselves fully, our failure is guaranteed.

When I feel frustrated, I take Rosalynn's words of encouragement from her book of poetry, *Lady Lotus*, that I will share with her permission:

"I close my eyes,  
Start the re-wiring  
Start counting my blessings  
I remember to start small out of awareness to sometimes  
have a longer list  
I begin to name my 4-leaf clovers with unclenched fists"<sup>1</sup>

I'd like to apologize for my lack of transparency. I promised a calming story, and I've instead given you a call to action. After the generosity of receiving his recognition, I've had the nerve to ask for more. But the stakes are too high for us to give up on our potential as physical therapists. The population desperately needs us to deliver. We must take charge of our destiny and bloom where we are planted today. We must generously provide water and light by encouraging one another. Let's not wait for things to be perfect to fulfill the destiny that Robert Dicus imagined for us and let's cultivate an abundant garden. Thank you. **I**

## REFERENCE

1. Diaz RJ. "Waiting Room Etiquette." *Lady Lotus*. Albuquerque, NM: Read or Green Books; 2021;83.