

E1 Amy Staley

Speaker1: Most ninth-grade science classrooms are plastered with bright, inspiring quotes like "Be yourself", "Everyone else is taken". My ninth-grade science classroom had one single poster. It said, and I quote, "Flowers, plants, and living things. They all die. And so do we." On the first day we learned about photosynthesis and planting new seeds, I was a new student in a Catholic school, and I didn't know anything about religion. But I did know about science because despite being raised by a single parent in a low-income neighborhood, science allowed me to take an exam to transition from my public school to this prestigious private school. I was new to the private school system. However, I was not new to the ideas of science or death. I spent the first few years of my childhood living in science as I watched cancer cells overtake my father before succumbing to his illness. As a four-year-old child, I felt a profound and confusing amount of sadness. Each Christmas, Santa would ask me what I wanted, and I asked for my dad. I had this vision that he lived in the sky, but I didn't understand why he couldn't at least visit me on Christmas. At the same time, I felt an immense amount of love from my mother, a healer who planted seeds with the hopes that I would someday receive flowers. She just wanted me to be happy, and she was thrilled that I'd have so many opportunities to be whoever I wanted at this new school. On my first day, I proudly told my teacher I want to be a nurse.

Speaker1: He said, "Are you sure?" "Nursing is hard" as if someone like me didn't have the brain capacity to learn. I felt so out of place wearing my red plaid skirt, not being allowed to wear my favorite hoop earrings, and almost getting kicked out by the priest on my very first day for wearing sandals. My mom watched me cry the entire ride home. I said, "It didn't work out." She said, "No, you're going back there tomorrow." That was the last thing that I wanted to do. But I did because I trusted that somehow science was going to make it worth it. I ended up going to nursing school, and throughout my time in nursing school, I picked up a job working with pregnant teens in foster care. I ended up in this position by chance, and on my very first day, I thought about applying for new jobs. Not a single teen would speak to me, let alone look me in the eye. Finally, they spoke and they did not call me Mom, but they did call me Miss Amy. And I have to tell you that while earning the title of the registered nurse was hard, earning the title of Miss Amy was just as hard. These teens taught me that respect is not given. It's earned. They barely looked me in the eye. That was until I helped them with their math and

science homework. One of the girls looked at me and said, I don't talk to this staff here, but you.

Speaker1: "You look like you've been through some staff." I still don't know if that was a compliment or not, but nevertheless, she appreciated the mutual respect that I had for all of her hard work. And she did all of her homework. Little did she and the other teens know I struggled, too, with the school. My teacher was right. Nursing school was hard, but I was raised by a single mom who taught me that hard is not a reason to stop. So I kept going to school and afterward, I'd pick up more teens in the middle of the night, take them to the foster home and care for them. I taught them to cook, care for their children, and build resumes. I raised them on love alongside my boss, the most incredible woman who would literally give the clothes off of her back. We put the home in the foster home. However, just like in regular homes, sometimes things would go wrong. When things would go wrong, we would use codes so that the kids wouldn't worry. And the most common code that we would use was God is working overtime tonight. One of my proudest moments at that job was the day that I took all the teens to this huge job fair. We prepped their resumes. A local nonprofit even donated money for each of them to get a professional outfit. Usually, I would take them shopping, but for this event I had homework, so they went on their own. On the day of the event, I picked them up and they all looked amazing.

Speaker1: But one of them was wearing Fuzzy Victoria's Secret pink slippers. I looked at her and said, You absolutely cannot wear those. But she had spent all of her money on them. She didn't have anything else. So I said, All right, you're going to wear my boots, I'm going to wear your slippers, and you guys will just meet me outside after the event. No problem. Right Until I'm sitting in my car a security guard knocks on my window and says, Are you, Miss Amy? Turns out that because they were minors, I needed to sign them into the event. No problem. Right. Except for the fact that I am now wearing fuzzy pink Victoria's Secret slippers. I. Took a deep breath and quietly said to myself, God, I just know you are working triple time tonight, but please do not let these people look down at my shoes. Well, they did. Not only did everyone see my shoes, but the CEO of a huge company came up to me, shook my hand, and thanked me for getting the girls into this event. I will never forget the look on this gentleman's face. It was one that I will certainly never forget. God must have been really short-staffed that night. Despite my footwear, several of the girls were offered jobs that night as

researchers, interns, and even florists. They planted seeds, trimmed stems, and created some of the most beautiful floral arrangements that New York City has ever seen. Not only that, but several went on to graduate high school and build careers of their own.

Speaker1: I also graduated from nursing school and ended up being blessed with my dream job at one of the top hospitals in New York. Miss Amy became a nurse. Amy and I went on to work at New York Presbyterian Hospital while Cornell. I began a master's program at Columbia University, and I even had the opportunity to attend a virtual class at Harvard. On the first day, I wore my favorite hoop earrings, and whatever shoes I wanted. And just like Elle Woods herself, thought to myself, What? Like it's hard. When COVID-19 hit New York City, I was a part of science again. I was the element separating human life from death. In my worn-out Nike sneakers. We would report trends, and the next day they were reported by the CDC. Unfortunately, one of those trends was death. In August of 2022, I had the opportunity to attend an Infodemic training with the World Health Organization and the Story Collider. When I joined this training, I promised myself that I was not going to talk about death because I am an optimist. But when we were split up into groups and my fellow trainees found out that I was a nurse from New York, almost every single person that I spoke to said something along the lines of many people died in New York. And I'm so sorry that you experienced that. And while that is true, and while I have seen the insides of more refrigerator trucks than probably most grocery stores, I also remind myself that refrigerator trucks are also used to preserve flowers.

Speaker1: And while many of my patients cannot communicate, it is my job to find out what they need to grow and heal. Just like flowers. Some need more soil, others need water, and some have already served their purpose of bringing joy and beauty into this world. And they are ready to stop growing at this Infodemic training. I met a woman named Julia who helps refugees survive in Berlin, and Vanessa, who is a survivor of her own battles with antimicrobial resistance. And it was at this point that I realized that maybe the stories that we share and the legacies that we leave are what make death acceptable. In a sense, the fact that someone else may grow and flourish and bring joy and beauty into their own living and breathing environment because of the discoveries that we've made, the science that we've blossomed. I view the future of science the same way that I view my past. An unpredictable story with challenges and turning points that require changing your mindset, your attitude, and sometimes your shoes to step

outside of boundaries and change the narrative. I probably haven't even lived half my lifespan yet, and yet others are already picking flowers from the seeds that I've planted. That's what science is all about. Living things may all eventually die, but I choose what's left behind. Yes, most ninth-grade science classrooms looked much different than mine, but those who believe in writing the future of science, we're not like most people anyway.