Personal Narrative: A Journey Through Loss, Resilience, and the Pursuit of Public Health

BELLA VINCENT
Lab Manager and Research Scientist, Stanford Medicine Pediatric Cardiology

Annabelle (Bella) Grace Binti Vincent is a trained epidemiologist and research scientist, originally from Malaysia and having grown up in Texas and the Middle East. She completed her undergraduate degree in Biology with a concentration in Statistical Modeling at the University of Texas at Austin and recently graduated with a Master's in Epidemiology and Clinical Research from Stanford. Currently, she works as a lab manager and research scientist in Stanford Medicine's Pediatric Cardiology division. In her free time, Bella loves weightlifting, writing poetry, sudoku, and getting lost in new cities.

When I reflect on the early days of my childhood, I can vividly picture my sister and me playing in our backyard, where we transformed ordinary moments into grand adventures — as we voiced a team of Barbie scientists. Together, we saved the world from an evil giraffe seeking to destroy all plant life. Even as children, we shared an unshakeable bond, fueled by a common aspiration to become scientists dedicated to improving human health. While my sister pursued human geography and population dynamics, I found my passion in biology and epidemiology, with a keen focus on infectious diseases. We envisioned a future where our paths would converge in collaborative research to address the pressing public health challenges that awaited us in a warming world.

This foundation of curiosity and commitment laid the groundwork for my academic and professional journey. After completing my Master's in epidemiology and clinical research, I had the privilege of continuing in the lab. My research focused on elucidating the heart mechanisms necessary for treating congenital defects, impacting critically-ill children. Engaging with these young patients ignited a fierce motivation within me. Each line of code I wrote, and every abstract I drafted sprang from a deep-seated commitment to fostering understanding in the biological sciences while helping others.

Over six years of intensive study and research, I have learned how to be a capable and inquisitive scientist, contributing meaningfully to medicine. This year, both my sister and I would graduate - and we continued to dream of researching together, fulfilling our childhood aspirations of making a difference in the world. We pictured ourselves as a formidable duo, tackling issues that crossed the boundaries of health, geography, and the ever-evolving patterns of disease amidst environmental changes.

Then, tragedy struck in February of this year. I lost my little sister to an ischemic stroke, a sudden and cruel twist that left an indelible mark on

my heart and irrevocably shifted the landscape of my life. Her unexpected death wasn't just a personal loss; it felt like an abrupt end to the dreams we had shared, to the plans we had made.

Yet, in the midst of this profound sorrow, I found an unwavering resolve. My sister had always believed in the power of science and the imperative of public health. It was this belief that urged me to channel my energy into my work in her honor. It became clear to me that my emotional turmoil could be a catalyst for greater understanding — not just for myself, but for the world around me. Four months later, through sheer determination and commitment, I culminated my efforts in the acceptance of my first paper as first author. This achievement was not merely an academic milestone; it was a testament to my resilience and a way to carry my sister's legacy forward.

As I continue my research, I nurture my passion for research while holding tightly to my sister's memory. I aim to employ the power of epidemiology to contribute to public health initiatives that focus on the prevention of diseases that disproportionately affect vulnerable populations. My experiences have underscored for me the necessity of resilience in the face of adversity, not only in the life of a scientist but for those whose lives depend on the advancements we strive to make.

Indeed, my journey through loss has transformed my perspective on public health. It has deepened my resolve to address the intricate connections between human life, health challenges, and societal dynamics. As I strive to fulfill our shared dream of impactful research, I remain committed to making a difference — driven by the love I have for my sister and the conviction that science holds the power not just to heal, but to save lives. Through this lens, I embrace the future, emboldened to tackle the pressing health challenges we face together.