

## EPISODE 215 Fired to Fired Up. An Anesthesiologist's Tale of Triumph over Tragedy and finding a new purpose at 60.

## With guest Dr. Lynette Charity

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- LC: "I was second guessing myself, but I then finally said to myself, what would have been the alternative? I knew at 60, I needed to pivot to something else. And I couldn't stay in medicine much longer. So, that's what I did."
- HF: Welcome to The Doctor's Crossing Carpe Diem podcast. If you're questioning your career in medicine, you've come to the right place. I'm Heather Fork, a former dermatologist and founder of The Doctor's Crossing. As a master certified coach, I've helped hundreds of physicians find greater happiness in their career, whether in medicine, a nonclinical job, or something else. I started this podcast to help you discover the career path that's best for you and give you some resources and encouragement to make it happen. You don't need to get stuck at the white coat crossroads. So, pull up a chair, my friend, and let's carpe that diem.

Hey there, and welcome to the Doctor's Crossing Carpe Diem podcast. I'm your host, Heather Fork, and you're listening to episode number 215. Today, I'm so honored to introduce Dr. Lynette Charity, an anesthesiologist whose incredible story is one of resilience, reinvention, and finding purpose in the face of life's challenges. At the age of 60, Dr. Charity was fired from her job, a moment that could have been devastating, but instead became a turning point.



Where did this unexpected path lead her? We'll discover how she overcame doubts, both her own and those of others, and carved a meaningful new direction for herself. Dr. Charity's journey is all the more remarkable considering her early years. Growing up in a household marked by tragedy and hardship, she faced significant challenges, including a lack of support and love. Yet, through sheer determination and vision, she rose above her circumstances to become a physician.

Her story is a powerful reminder that at any age, you can redefine your path and not let others' doubts stand in the way of your own dreams. Dr. Charity has recently released her first book, which I absolutely love, "Escape Plan: Dreaming My Way Out of the Projects", which chronicles her journey from humble beginnings to attending medical school and starting her anesthesia residency.

This episode promises to be a candid, inspiring, and thought-provoking conversation about resilience, reinvention, and creating meaning in life's most challenging moments. Let's dive in. Well, welcome, Lynette.

- LC: Thank you for having me, Heather. I'm so excited to be here.
- HF: I'm so excited to have you. And we go way back. You're one of my OG clients from way back. And I just have to say, your book is remarkable. It's your first book, and I read it, and I couldn't put it down. And it brought tears to my eyes on a number of occasions and made me laugh. But even though I knew your story to some degree, because you told me a lot of these things, reading it just gave me a whole other level of respect for the amazing woman that you are to be able to do what you've done. And I'm excited to have the listeners learn more about you.
- LC: Well, let's start at the beginning. No, let's not start at the beginning. That would take too long. Let's take a part of my story where, when I was nine years old, I was watching a TV show called Ben Casey. And I looked at that show and looked at Ben Casey, and I made a



decision at that point in time that my escape plan from where I was, was going to be to become a doctor.

Now, why did I need to have an escape plan? Well, because of the fact that I grew up in the segregated South. I grew up with an alcoholic, abusive father. I had so many things in my life. Unfortunately, my young sister was hit by a car and killed when I was six years old. And I struggled with that and other things. And I just needed to get away from my circumstances. And that drove me, watching that show, drove me to find out how I could potentially escape.

- HF: And this dedication that you had to your mission and your goal and your escape plan was unwavering in spite of many people who discouraged you and put barriers in your way. What do you think makes you different, Lynette, than some of the other people you saw who didn't make it out of the project?
- LC: That's a very good question. And I've asked myself that question for a long time. At one point, I thought I was switched at birth. And I thought maybe that was what had happened, that I didn't belong there. But when I realized that, no, this is your family, I just decided that there was something more for me to do in life than to be a welfare mother living in the projects. I saw a lot of that growing up. And that was not for me. And also, my mom was a battered wife. And that was not for me. I had a lot of drive to get out of that situation. And that was my purpose. And I just had that stick-to-it-iveness. And I did it because every time I thought about what would happen if I didn't, it just pushed me to go on.
- HF: I think one thing that really stuck out to me was the challenge you had in just having somebody love you. You didn't feel loved by your father. You didn't really feel loved by your mother. And you kept trying in different ways to get some positive feedback and hugs and just what any child would want. And it made me wonder, how did you keep going without having your heart become really bitter and maybe going in a destructive



direction, such as using drugs or getting into bad situations for yourself, getting into trouble?

LC: Lynette was not an angel. I got into a lot of trouble in school. But my trouble in school was due to the fact that I had witnessed seeing my sister get hit by a car and killed. And there was no grief training back then for children. And all of the feelings that I had came out as anger. And my father loved my sister very, very much. He had no love for me. In fact, he even said, "I wish that you had died instead of my Beverly."

And yes, that would have maybe hurt a lot of people. But I just kept thinking to myself, "Well, all right, that's fine. But I'm going to get out of here. I have to get out of here. And I'm not going to allow you or my mom or the environment to stop me from doing it."

Now, where did I get that from? I don't know. I had a great aunt who was one of the first Black principals of an elementary school. She was well educated. And she is the one, because back then Black folks did not go to have mental health problems. They just didn't do that. But she took me to a psychologist because of all the issues I was having. And I tell you, that psychologist, we only had eight sessions together. I still remember him. And oh, my goodness, when he told me that it was okay for me to have my sister as my imaginary friend, that made all the difference. I could talk to Beverly. I could tell her what was going on. She took the road with me wherever I went. And when I may accomplish something, she was there with me. I had her to love me. Even if I could not physically touch her, I had her.

HF: I know there's so many hard things that happened in your story. And I'm really honored that you're sharing them. I just still feel that pain of what your father said. And no one should ever hear that. That's just wrong. And again, I wanted to bring out your story because I think it helps us, for any of us, when we're struggling and we're going to be talking about crossroads when you are fired, is we can always look at what's happened to us, what people have done to us. We can feel like a victim. We can feel



disempowered. And that's what we can focus on. And that can really take us down into the sewer. We have a hard time getting out.

But I love your story because at any juncture, you could have gone down the tubes. But I love how you said, "I'm not going to own what anyone is saying about me if it's not serving me. I'm going to go forward." Would you like to tell us about when you were in high school and how you got to the White High School? And when you were planning on being a doctor and going to medical school, how that happened? Were you able to get out of the projects and then get onto this education?

LC: Well, the short story is that we did not have desegregation right away, but you could get picked to go to a White High School in limited numbers. And I wanted to go. I had been picked. And my mom said, no. She says, "I don't want you to go to that school because they will harm you there." And I said, I can take care of myself. I had two older brothers. I know how to fight. But she wouldn't sign their permission slip. So, I signed it. I forged her name. And so, when she found out, she was upset. But she said it looks like you really want to do this. But I would like to tell you about what happened in 1954 in Little Rock, Arkansas, when they integrated a White High School. And they threw one of the girls down some stairs. And I go, "What? You didn't tell me that. Why didn't you tell me that? Maybe I would have changed my mind." But I had already signed the slip.

So, I go there. And I truly was expecting to get a lot of angriness from the students. But where it came out was I had to walk through this White neighborhood. And the women were sitting on their porches as if they were just ready for me to come through. And they were mean. In fact, I just called them wicked witches because they called me names, told me to go back to Africa. And I go, "How can I go back to Africa when I've never been there before?"

And so, it was just interesting what they did. And then one of the women actually grabbed something in the grass and threw it at me. And it turned out to be dog poop. But I just kept on going where I had to go. And once I got to the school, it was like, "This www.doctorscrossing.com/episode215



is a school. There are White people here. There are a few of us here. I'm okay." And then all I did was do the work. That's what I wanted to do, is show them and show myself that I could do the work. If I wanted to become a doctor, I had to be a good student. Education was part of my escape plan. That's how I was going to get out of Dodge. I was going to graduate from high school, go to college, the first in my family, and I was going to become a doctor.

And lo and behold, no one would help me to apply to colleges or to do anything at the school. They basically said no one wants you in a college. You can go to a Negro college, but you can't go anywhere else. And I just said, I just need just a hand up. Someone help me. And I said that when I got off the bus from school, after they told me they weren't going to help me, and lo and behold, my mom had gotten a phone call from an admission director at Chatham College for Women in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and they sent me a bus ticket to come up there and to interview. It was a 22-hour bus ride. But I went up there, and all they said was, "Do you like the campus? Do you like it here?" I go, yes. I said, "But my parents can't afford the tuition. It was \$3,000, but I can't afford the tuition." And they go, "We didn't ask you that. We want you to come." And I left there. I went home with an acceptance letter and a scholarship, a four-year scholarship.

There I was. I made that crossroad. I got into college, and I walked around that school my senior year with that acceptance letter. I just made noises and just said "I'm going to college." And I was so excited about that. And so that's that part.

And then from college, I went through a lot of things in college, but similar thing happened. My junior year of college, I got a notification from Tufts Medical School that they wanted to interview me. And I had applied, and I'm at a women's college. I had also applied at Harvard, but we won't go into that story. But I went on the interview, and same thing happened. Where is Tufts on your list of medical schools? And I said, it's number one.

HF: Great answer. Great answer.



- LC: And that's what happened is that I got an acceptance letter a week later, and I was going to medical school. I tell you someone was looking out for me. That's all I can say. But I graduated with honors. And I tell people, maybe it was partly affirmative action, but I still did the work. You have to do the work.
- HF: Well, Lynette, okay, back up here. You were a straight A student. You're a National Merit Scholar. You always did your homework. You always showed up. You excelled. You even were getting these hundreds on this test. And the social studies professor put in questions that he didn't teach, and you still got them right. And then he accused you of cheating, and that's a whole other story. You got in on your own merit, Lynette, period, end of story.

Anyway, there's so much that happened in our college, and also in high school. And then she also talks a bit about starting the residency. I recommend the book. I recommend this book, and we are going to link to it in the show notes. We're going to do a little fast forward here, but could you give us just a nutshell to catch us up in your career to this time when you were fired at age 60?

LC: Well, what happened is I finished medical school. I had been accepted to a residency program in anesthesiology. I had to do an internship first. And during that internship, I saw this guy that I really liked, and we started dating. And he is now my husband of 45 years. And from that, he joined the military after his internal medicine residency. And he told them, "Well, my wife is an anesthesiologist, and once she finishes her anesthesia residency, she can join up too." I guess I got voluntold, and I went into the military with my husband and achieved the rank of lieutenant colonel. My husband stayed in forever, and he achieved the rank of colonel.

But we were then transferred to San Francisco, where I did two fellowships in OB anesthesia and neurosurgical anesthesia, and he did a critical care fellowship. We were kind of this dynamic couple. Then we were transferred to Madigan Army Medical Center



in Tacoma, Washington. And there, I was the assistant chief of anesthesia and operative services, and my husband was the assistant chief of the intensive care unit.

I spent a couple of years with that, and then I got pregnant. And so, I felt that I needed to get out of the military, because at that time, you could be separated, even if you were married. I ended up becoming a partner in a group practice in Tacoma, Washington, and I was with them for 14 years. And then my husband got transferred to the East Coast to be at Walter Reed. I followed him, and I just did locum's work at the time until I could figure out what I wanted to do.

I was always able to find employment, and I was adaptable. I liked being in this group for 14 years, but I have to admit that once I left that group and expand my horizons, I learned little tidbits about me as an anesthesiologist and what I wanted to get out of my practice that I don't know if I would have gotten if I stayed there and been there for 20 years or something.

30 years goes by, and I'm doing all of this stuff, and then all of a sudden, I'm at this hospital where I am now an employee. And as some of your listeners will know, we used to take call that no one would ever take in this day and age. I used to take 72-hour call. I would be on call Friday, Saturday, Sunday, off Monday. And in my younger days, I could do that. But this particular time, I was on call, and I was up for 20 hours straight doing cases. And it was right after my 60th birthday. I was doing these cases. And the next day, I had more cases to do, and I started feeling unsafe. And so, I told the person that I couldn't do this anymore. I had to go home and get some rest. And I was told that's not how this works. And they go, "You have to stay here until we give you permission to leave."

I had never had anyone say that to me as a physician, that they could demand that I stay when I told them that I was unsafe. And I said, listen, I honestly can't do this. You're going to have to find someone else. And so, I left. And it was hard. I just slept for like 24 hours. And then I go back to work, and I was called into the principal's office. And he



told me, he says, "We're going to let you go." And I go, why? He says, you have to do what you're told. You have to be a team player. I go, I was unsafe. You want me to give anesthesia and be unsafe. I can't do that. He says, "Well, we don't want you here." But the interesting story about all of this is the demeaning way that I was terminated. First of all, I had to have a security guard meet me in my locker room while I emptied out my locker, making sure I didn't steal anything. And I was just happy that I didn't have any fentanyl or propofol or any of that, because sometimes I just throw something in my locker.

Anyway, I did that. And then I had to do what I call the perp walk. And I come out of the changing room, and I have to walk down this corridor with my belongings with the security guard. And people are walking by me and not making eye contact, turning the other way. No one even asked what this was all about, because they knew, because many people before me had had done that perp walk. And then I go downstairs. I get to the front door. They deactivate my badge and say, bye.

I go outside of that hospital. And I was overwhelmed with a lot of emotions at the time. What did I do wrong? Maybe I could have stayed there longer. All these questions. And I was about to cry. And then all of a sudden, I looked across the street, and there was an ambulatory surgery center over there. I walked over there. And I walked in and said, "Do you guys need an anesthesiologist? I'm available." And they had heard what had happened. They said, "Yes, Dr. Charity, we can use you." It gave me at least a chance to continue some income while I figured out what I wanted to do. Because I knew at 60, I needed to pivot to something else. And I couldn't stay in medicine much longer. So, that's what I did.

HF: Well, that's a disturbing story. I've talked to other physicians who have been in not that degree of having to be on call for 72 hours, but situations where they felt unsafe. And that could be a physician in the ER, who's really being threatened by a patient, but the security guards aren't doing anything about it. Or they really feel like there's something that's going on that's not appropriate. And they call it out. It could be sexual harassment



or something like that. And they get fired. So I definitely hear these stories. And the hard part, I think, too, is that people then can go to the second guessing, "Was it my fault? I've done something differently. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything. Maybe I got too reactive."

What advice would you give someone who's kind of doing that Monday morning quarterbacking and maybe they're still holding on to shame from what happened? And it could even be 10-20 years ago.

LC: I think the most important thing that I figured out in that moment of clarity, once I looked across the street, was that the way this happened, yes, I was second guessing myself. But I then finally said to myself, "What would have been the alternative? If you had stayed there, if you had been unsafe, could you have put your patient in jeopardy? Could you have done something so egregious that you get sued?" To me, it was, "All right, honestly, I didn't like that job anyway." But that's another thing.

But I really had to sit with myself, because I didn't go to work there immediately. I went home, and I just sat in my own space and just reviewed what I had done up to that point. And I said, finally, "I'm a board certified anesthesiologist with over 30 years of experience. Darn it. And I'm not going to wear this. I'm not going to wear it. If the shoe fits, wear it. If it doesn't, throw it away." And I just said, I got to get rid of those socks. And I did.

HF: Lynette, this is brilliant. And I think this is part of your superpower. And I see this in so many places in your story, is that there are these junctures where you can go into being the victim. Feeling sorry for yourself. "This is what people did to me", because there were a lot of things that people did to you that weren't right. But you have this amazing ability to shift, to go to this place of empowerment, to get your swagger on, and to know what you're made of and what your value is.



I think this is such an important point for us to keep remembering, because that ego that we have, and this isn't the healthy ego of self-esteem, this is the ego that wants to take us down, can often get into our head and start telling us stories and changing the narrative to not serve us. But I'm curious, how do you make that switch? Because you do it. You may not be aware of actually how you do it, but can you unpack it a little bit for us?

LC: I had had a great career along the way, and there had been other issues all across, even with me being Black, me being a Black female, patients not wanting me as their anesthesiologist, but not exactly saying why. And what I've learned about people who, in their own world, don't like you for some reason, either you will allow them to affect you, or you just say, "All right, you don't want me, I'll go find one of my partners if they're available. Otherwise, you're going to have to wait till the end of it." I would just throw it back on them and saying, "I'm the one that's available. I'm very good." I would even call nurses over sometimes. "This guy doesn't really think that I'm that good. Tell them how good Dr. Charity is. - Oh, Dr. Charity, she is great."

I had one patient that said to me, he says, I didn't know they let coloreds into medical school. I go, well, they let this colored in. And I don't allow it because, as you said, if I had allowed all of those transgressions against me to affect me, I would be a blob. I would be somewhere where I'm not, where I don't want to be. So, if anything, I think that your listeners, if they can just find a place where they can just sit with themselves and unpack it, as you said, and see what the pros and cons are, but always understand that you are the person. You are your own person. You have to do you. And you can't let anyone else change that.

HF: Right. And you did not let other people define your value. And I think that's, again, something that's so beautiful about you. You would always go inside and see your value and believe in it and let it drive you. Because you could have written a lot of different stories about yourself from things that you heard or said to you. But I love that you're



like, "No, no way. This stops here. I'm going to live my life in order to serve me, serve myself and my vision."

Another great thing about you is you have this wonderful sense of humor. And this is a little bit of a segue into the last part of this podcast, where we're going to talk about what else came next after being hired to being fired up with that.

LC: I was in a quandary about where I was going to go because, as you know, we devote our lives to the career of medicine. And a lot of people, I'm always jealous that other people have other talents, singing, dancing, whatever. But I never felt like all I wanted to do was be a doctor. I had to really search, "What could I do else? What else could I do?"

I went to this conference, a SEAK meeting, and it was nonclinical roles for the retiring physician, that kind of a thing. I said, let me figure out if I can do something else, because I don't want to really be in the operating room anymore. And I'd had a dream before I'd gone, and I woke up and I said, I know what I'm going to be. I'm going to be a standup comic, loud singer, voiceover actor. And I take that to SEAK.

- HF: Okay. And explain what SEAK is for people who might not know SEAK.
- LC: SEAK, it's a conference. The SEAK part stands for skills, education, abilities, and knowledge, and what they help physicians do and across the board of how long you've been in there, they help you to find a new purpose, find a new place. Maybe you might be able to do research. Maybe you want to write medical journals. Maybe you want to do pharma. They really help you. You want to be a coach.

You go there and it's amazing. And you have other people doing it and helping you. You go and sit with people and they talk about your possibilities. And as physicians, we have not really always had that at hand, someone that can guide us from point A to point B, because a lot of times we are in our own little world as physicians and we have our, we have a lot of things on our mind, but SEAK for me was what I thought was going to get



me to a place where maybe I could continue to do medicine, maybe into my 70s. But just like anything, there wasn't a lot of interest in doing a class on becoming a standup comic. I didn't see that anywhere.

- HF: That wasn't an offering that they had. Yeah, because SEAK is a nonclinical career conference and they have a number of things, but they've never had how to be a standup comic.
- LC: Fortunately, after being turned down by two people, I met Dr. Heather Fork and I was almost in tears. She may not remember the encounter, but I was just so fraught with frustration that no one wanted to help me in what I thought I wanted to do. And I just said to her, I want to be a standup comic, a loud singer. And she did not diss me. She didn't say that's not possible. She just sat back in her chair for a minute. She goes, "Well, this is different. You know what? What I think you could do is speaking because what you will find is that comedy, you have to get up in front of people and speak. You're telling jokes and you could maybe make money by becoming a professional speaker because maybe stand up comedy will not give you any revenue."

And she recommended that I joined Toastmasters and I do what I'm told. If it's out of my wheelhouse, I do what I'm told. She told me to join Toastmasters. So I joined three chapters of Toastmasters. But the one thing that happened in that was that I loved Toastmasters and I'm a competitive person. They told me they had contests. Over the course of time in Toastmasters, I started winning awards and I went to Kuala Lumpur and I won a third place trophy. And I said I think it's time for me to become a professional speaker. And so, that's what I did.

The thing about it was when I was trying to figure out what I would speak on, I fell back on the fact that I have a history of depression for a long time. And at one point in my life when I was down, and this is another story, too, that maybe it will be in another book, but I contemplated suicide.



I got to the point where I was standing on a bridge about to jump because I couldn't handle what was going on in my life at the time. And the women physicians out there may understand that trying to put all, trying to be a doctor, a mother, a lover, all of these things sometimes come together and you can't make sense of it. And at that point in my life, I couldn't, I was 45, I think, and I just couldn't make sense of it. And I said my family would be better off if I were dead because that's what the voices were telling me. You're not a good doctor. You're not a good mother. You're not a good wife. You should die.

The person who saved me from jumping off that bridge was the voice of my mother that came in, and all she said was, was call me. And that sort of broke me out of this feud that I was in because it seemed, I looked down at the water and said it's probably cool. I'm rationalizing all of this. And when she did that, I stood up straight. I got down from the bridge and I started to cry, but it was one of those things that was a crossroads where there might not have been me at the time.

I felt that I would be able to share that story. I did it in a TED talk, but I want to share that story. And I would go and speak to physicians to let them know that our mental health is very important and we needed to stop the stigma. And so, that was my role at that time. And of course, I throw a little comedy in there.

HF: You're very, you're very good at that, Lynette. I'm so glad you didn't jump. I'm so glad you didn't and that your mom's voice came in there. I love that you've taken this direction of something that you really was really calling to you, which is speaking and being out in front of people. I absolutely remember you at the SEAK conference coming to my mentoring table. And I love people who have out-of-the-box ideas. I will never, ever dismiss them. I absolutely love them.

Guys, Lynette took this by storm. When I was into Toastmasters, it took me two years to get through the competent communicator manual. I think Lynette was winning her first



district championship, within a couple of months. And then she was in Kuala Lumpur competing internationally.

Anyway, it was meant for you. And you took this message of talking about burnout and depression and suicide and bringing your gift. And humor really is a gift that you have. And so, I know we're kind of at time here, but to put a little bow on this, there's a big bow. There's a lot here. If someone is at the crossroads, whether they're 35, 45, 60, 65, wherever they're at, and they're thinking about, "I don't know what else I can do. I don't have transferable skills. Who's going to want me? How am I going to figure this out?" What advice would you give them?

LC: There are people out there to help you. Accept their help. Years ago, I would never thought about having a physician coach or a career coach, we'll call it. But I think it's necessary now. The world is so muddy and cloudy. There's just so much out there. You need someone.

And this is what Dr. Fork did for me. She gave me clarity as to where my path was, because I just needed people, her, to just ask me certain questions so that I could make sense of what was going on and to make sure that I wasn't a dinosaur. I really appreciated that, that I had something to offer. Yes, I would say get a coach, get a mentor. You have to have someone in your sphere to help you through this. You cannot do this alone. You just cannot.

HF: Well, thank you for those words, Lynette. And I've gotten so much out of knowing you.
I'm looking forward to, I know you're going to have a sequel to this book, Escape Plan.
And like I said, I'll have this in the show notes for anybody who wants to read her amazing memoir.

I would also like to add to that I know when you're trying to figure things out, resources are helpful. Sometimes the baby stuff is good. And I do have free resources on my website, and those are under the freebie tab. So if you go to doctorscrossing.com under



the freebie tab, there's a starter kit. And this is meant to help you by asking you questions, you look at your situation, giving you resources when you're trying to figure things out. So, if you haven't seen this starter kit yet, and you think that would be useful, just go to doctorscrossing.com under the freebie tab. There are at least 10 other freebies. I will put that link in the show notes.

I just want to again say how honored I am to know you, Lynette. I'm so proud of you. And you should be very proud of your life and this book and all different ways you've served others.

- LC: I appreciate you, Dr. Fork. Very much so. I really do. And I think that it's just very important in this day and age that we have a community of people that we can ask questions to without any reprisal, that we can feel safe in our environment.
- HF: And thank you so much, Dr. Charity. You really brought a lot of clarity here with your story and your wisdom and your examples. Thank you again. And to my dear listeners, thank you for being here. Thank you for sharing the podcast. Thank you for giving it some love when you're rating it on iTunes or Spotify. All these things really help. And I also welcome your suggestions for future episodes. You can reach us at team@doctorscrossing.com with your suggestions. And as always, don't forget to carpe that diem and I'll see you in the next episode. Bye for now.

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