

The Byte Stuff

KATHLEEN T. HAYES

When the earth shifted, Sherryl Tamboulian decided to shift her career along with it.

Tamboulian, 32 and in her third year at the Michigan State University College of Human Medicine, was working as a computer engineer in California when the San Francisco earthquake hit in 1989. She had a Ph.D. in computer science but was rethinking her career path. When her employer said that her workload wouldn't allow her time to do earthquake relief work, Tamboulian knew it was time to follow her dream and study medicine.

"That made me think about what values are really important," Tamboulian says. A year later, she quit her job to start her own consulting firm and began taking premedical courses.

As an undergrad at New Mexico State University, Tamboulian, a classical guitarist, considered studying music, but eventually went with computer science. "I was taking music theory and a computer class when I got the idea to write a computer program to arrange music," Tamboulian says. "Before I knew it, that's what I was doing."

She worked her way through college as a computer programmer, and after graduating at age 19—she had gotten her high-school GED at age 16—Tamboulian went to work for IBM building telephone systems. She began taking graduate computer engineering classes part time at Duke University, where she eventually got her doctorate.

Tamboulian did postdoctoral work at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Institute for Computer Applications in Science and Engineering in Hampton, Virginia. There she studied computational fluid dynamics—how air and liquid flow over solid objects—then used her findings to increase airplane speeds.

"I'm really good at making things go fast," Tamboulian says. So when a California company that was building the world's fastest computer offered

her a job, she accepted. But her desire to become a doctor remained strong, and the company's negative response to her interest in helping earthquake victims was the final push she needed.

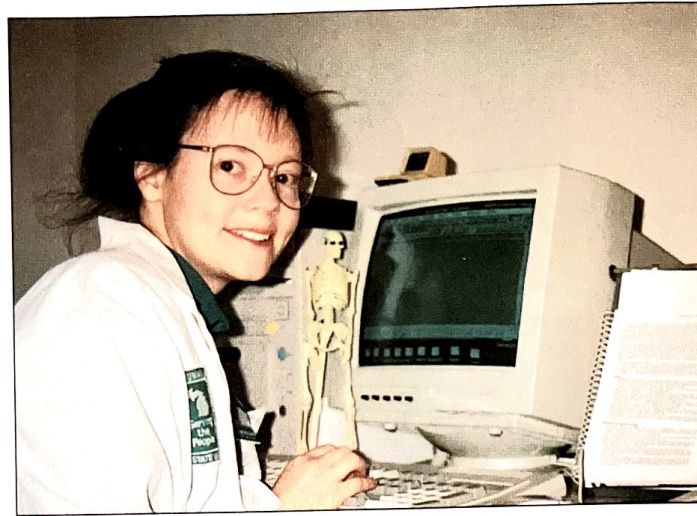
"Working in different jobs and owning my own company and working with many different people really opened me up," she says. "I realized by now that I was confident enough to really do medicine."

Having drawn out such a specialized career path prior to medical school, Tamboulian decided she wanted to avoid focusing on one area of medicine. "I'm fairly certain I want to do family practice," she says. "One reason is that I got caught in the trap of overspecializing. I mean, a Ph.D. is as overspecialized as you can get."

Tamboulian sees quite a few avenues for applying her overspecialized background to medicine. "I'm not sure where all these technologies fit in, but I want to find out," she says. Her work with computational fluid dynamics, for example, might be pertinent to blood flow. She's also interested in using computers as an information source for physicians and an educational tool for patients.

Still, her main interest is total body wellness. And because her background is so technical, she says, focusing on more general areas is a welcome change. "It might seem incongruous as a person with a technical background to have this as my main goal, but I've overconcentrated on specific tasks in the past, and this lets me achieve a balance."

Tamboulian is a firm believer in balancing all areas of her life and makes sure to break from her demanding schedule to explore creative outlets. A novel that she wrote and describes as "a space-opera adventure incorporating cyberpunk and biological warfare" is currently



Only as a medical student has Sherryl Tamboulian—NASA computer programmer and classical guitarist—found herself.

in the hands of a literary agent, and she is writing a musical about life as a medical student with husband Dave Meadows—a family practice resident—and a friend. Her interest in optimal health extends to all areas of her life. "It's vitally important to have a life outside of medical school," she says. "I try very hard to include exercise, good eating, and spiritual and creative activities."

Deciding to follow her dream, Tamboulian says, has liberated her. "Before medical school, I always had a list of things to do, but medical school was really the catalyst in my life," she says. "It allowed me to open myself up." □

Kathleen T. Hayes is a Chicago writer.