

# MAKE YOUR OWN HISTORY

## CIVICS LESSON

### Daniel Hale Williams/Susan La Flesche

#### Medical Pioneers

Daniel Hale Williams saved lives through his trailblazing work as the first American physician to perform successful heart surgery. His contemporary Susan La Flesche was also a medical pioneer, especial among Native Americans.



In June 1865 La Flesche was born on the Omaha Reservation in eastern Nebraska. Her father, Iron Eye (also known as Joseph LaFlesche because he was of French Canadian as well as Ponca ancestry) was the leader of the Omaha tribe. Her mother's roots were also mixed: the offspring of a white Army surgeon and a woman of Omaha-Oto-Iowa heritage. When Susan was a child, she witnessed a sick Native American woman die because a white doctor refused to treat her. She later reflected on this defining experience: "It was only an Indian and it did not matter. The doctor preferred hunting for prairie chickens rather than visiting poor, suffering humanity."

La Flesche made it her mission to become a doctor to bring quality health care to her people. She knew that gaining an education would fuel the pursuit of her

dream. She journeyed to Virginia to attend Hampton Institute, a historically black college with the goal of also educating Native American students. After graduating class salutatorian, La Flesche gained acceptance to Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania, one of the handful of schools in the United States at that time providing medical education for women. La Flesche appealed to an auxiliary of the Women's National Indian Association to secure the funding for her medical education.

Finishing the demanding three years of study as valedictorian, La Flesche became the first Native American to earn a medical degree. Returning to the Omaha reservation as the physician of the government-run boarding school, La Flesche worked twenty hour days out of an schoolyard office, addressing the immediate health concerns of 1,200 residents as well as temperance, preventative medicine and public health issues.

Similar to the groundbreaking medical work of Williams, La Flesche made her medical service so impactful that it became a movement that saved lives. Whatever your mission in life, be pioneering; make your mission a movement as you work to improve your:

### **MOMENT**

In the midst of significant happenings, take a breath . . . slow down . . . grasp their full meaning. Life-changing moments can pass you by if you're moving too fast to embrace them.

### **MINDSET**

Don't be easily distracted by non-priorities. Set your mind on what needs to be done today. La Flesche and Williams did pioneering work because they made every day count. Let this be your new mantra: attitude determines approach; approach determines success or failure.

### **MOMENTUM**

Once you succeed at one thing, don't stop there. Draw lessons from each experience to plan the new move. Use the positive energy to attain the next goal, to conquer bigger territory. Commit yourself to learning then implementing best practices. Take them to people and places that need them the most. As you build momentum through your devotion, your work will take on a life of its own. Like Williams and La Flesche, your life's mission may very well become a movement that will touch countless lives.