

Dr. Nancy Major and the Value of the Detour

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College can make it seem as though meaningful lives are supposed to unfold in straight lines. Choose a major. Build a plan. Make careful decisions early. Keep moving. Under that model, any interruption can start to feel like evidence that something has gone wrong. Dr. Nancy Major's lecture, "Do It Your Way," offered a steadier view of what a meaningful life can look like.¹ Her story was not a celebration of randomness or drift. It was the account of a life shaped by service, redirected by injury, enlarged by relationships, and strengthened through work born of real needs. The stakes of her argument are larger than career advice. She asks students to reconsider what defines progress and what to do when life changes course. Her lecture suggests that a meaningful life is not built by staying perfectly on script. It is built by learning how to respond when the script changes. Her claims raise the stakes of the conversation by asking students, institutions, and communities to reconsider how they define success, failure, responsibility, and what counts as a good life.

Students live under constant pressure to move efficiently and avoid delay. In that environment, detours can feel humiliating. Dr. Major's story offers a needed correction. She had planned on a substantial military career and hoped to become a general, but a running injury closed that path. She described the injury almost casually as a "hiccup," even though it changed the direction of her whole life and guided her toward sports medicine and radiology. In Dr. Major's presentation, the word hiccup carries real force. It does not deny disappointment, but it refuses to let the setback define the future. Instead of treating the interrupted plan as a final outcome, she treated it as a turn in the road. A disrupted path is not always a ruined one.

Her lecture also raises a question about what kind of ambition deserves admiration. The usual answer is easy to spot: collect credentials, move upward, and let visible achievement prove

¹ Nancy Major, "Do It Your Way" (lecture, Kennedy Center, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, March 4, 2026).

the effort was worthwhile. Her stories pointed to something more useful. Her work with Duke basketball is the clearest example. She noticed repeated stress fractures in players' feet and asked whether MRI scans could detect changes before athletes experienced pain or suffered fractures. Her question led to preventive measures, including orthotics and footwear adjustments. During the period she described, Duke avoided the stress fractures that had previously sidelined players. The story matters not only because of the result, but because of how the work began."

"Revealing" is not wrong, but "matters" has more life. She noticed a pattern and refused to accept the problem as fixed. She kept following the question until she found a helpful answer. That kind of effort deserves more respect than ambition aimed mainly at recognition. A healthy society depends on people who notice preventable problems and feel responsible to act.

Dr. Major's account of teaching at Duke sharpens that point. She expected only a small number of students to enroll in her course on sports injuries and radiology. The course was capped at twelve, then grew beyond fifty. She kept teaching because she loved the class and because students were still talking about it outside the classroom. That image offers a better measure of influence than the visibility universities often reward. A class has done real work when students keep thinking about it after they leave the room. Some of the best forms of influence are quiet and lasting, carried in the minds of other people. Her lecture suggests that meaningful work does not always announce itself loudly.

Her experience with professional athletes widens the moral frame of the lecture. When athletes she had worked with moved into the NBA, injuries were no longer only medical questions. Contracts, insurance, and future careers could depend on how an injury was handled. She often found herself advocating for athletes so they would be properly evaluated and treated. Her experience reveals the importance of expertise. Knowledge does not sit in neutral territory. It

places a person in situations where someone else's future may depend on judgment, honesty, and courage. Professional excellence includes stewardship. Students need to hear that. Career language is often saturated with self-advancement. Dr. Major's experience points toward a better model: learn deeply, work well, and use that knowledge to protect people when it counts.

Her mentoring work with women in the Global Sports Mentoring Program gives the lecture its widest reach. She works with women who return to countries where girls' athletics receive little support and where proposals often have to be presented in rooms dominated by men. She helps them prepare to make those proposals, face resistance, and keep their footing when they feel out of place. Her own years as the only woman in the room helped prepare her for that role. This part of the lecture moves beyond personal resilience and into public usefulness. Difficulty had not merely made her stronger. It had made her capable of strengthening others. There is a real difference between those two outcomes. Many people survive disappointment. Fewer learn how to turn it into a form of service. Dr. Major's life suggests that one of the best uses of hardship is to become the person who can steady someone else.

This part of the lecture speaks directly to students who worry that detours make them less impressive. Academic life can make people feel late, uncertain, or out of place, especially when their path has not been smooth. Dr. Major's answer during the question-and-answer session cuts through that fear. When asked what advice she would give her younger self, she said she would not change her path. Its mistakes and unexpected turns gave her the empathy and perspective to guide students who feel uncertain about their futures. She is not pretending that confusion or disappointment is painless. She is saying that the road she might once have erased became the road that shaped her capacity to serve. That idea has clear implications for me. I do not need life to look seamless in order for it to be meaningful. I need to stay open, keep working, and let the rougher parts of the path teach something that a smoother life might never have taught.

The implications for society are serious. Institutions do damage when they train people to worship flawless planning. They produce anxious strivers who panic at interruption and mistake delay for disgrace. Dr. Major's lecture offers a healthier standard. Curiosity, resilience, and service deserve greater recognition in how schools and workplaces define achievement. Students should not be taught that a good life depends on avoiding detours. They should be taught how to meet detours without losing heart, discipline, or direction. The same is true beyond the university. Communities need people who can adapt without becoming bitter, serve without demanding perfect conditions, and keep moving when the future looks different from what they expected.

"Do It Your Way" could have been a mere slogan in the hands of a less serious speaker. In Dr. Major's lecture, it became something more thoughtful and demanding. She was not suggesting reinventing yourself without limits or ignoring wise counsel. She meant that we should build a life in response to reality rather than cling to fantasies of control. Plans matter. Effort matters. Excellence matters. Life still refuses to stay inside neatly listed goals and expectations. Dr. Major shows that a person can be redirected without being diminished. Some of the most important work in life begins where the original script ends. Her lecture leaves students with a difficult but hopeful truth: detours do not automatically ruin a meaningful life. Often, they are where life begins to take its deepest shape.

Bibliography

Major, Nancy. "Do It Your Way." Lecture, Kennedy Center, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, March 4, 2026.