



## Our healthcare system's hurting us. Why are lawmakers complicit?

**"I wanted to scream at every single one of them and say, 'how dare you? How could you let this happen to me?'"**

*911. What's your emergency?*

*America's healthcare system is broken and people are dying.*

Welcome to **Code WACK!**, where we shine a light on America's callous healthcare system, how it hurts us and what we can do about it. I'm your host, **Brenda Gazzar**.

*(music)*

This time on **Code WACK!** What inspired single-payer advocate and mother **Rebecca Wood** to put much of her activism on hold to "sharpen her swords"? What's behind her commitment to ensuring that everyone in America has access to single-payer, improved Medicare for All? To find out, we interviewed Rebecca, a first-year law student and public interest fellow at the **University of Massachusetts**. She's a 2024 Rappaport Fellow in Law and Public Policy and the president of the University of Massachusetts Law National Lawyers Guild chapter. This is the second episode in a two-part series with Rebecca.

***Welcome back to Code WACK! Rebecca!***

***Q: In the last episode, you shared how you ultimately lost all your teeth and parts of your jaw after you delayed getting a root canal and crown so that you could pay for your daughter's speech therapy appointments. You've made a lot of sacrifices to ensure your daughter, born extremely premature, could have the best life possible. When did you start sharing your story on a national level?***

**Wood:** Oh, I spoke at the 2017 Bernie Sanders Medicare-for-All bill introduction, and I testified in 2019 in front of the House Ways and Means committee for a hearing on pathways to universal health care or something to that effect.

***Q: And what was that experience like for testifying in front of the committee?***

**Wood:** Both the bill introduction and the testimony were surprising experiences. The bill introduction, I had never told anyone about my mouth. I think maybe four people knew that I didn't have any teeth at that point. I was so ashamed and so humiliated by that fact that I did everything to hide it <laugh>. And if you go back and you watch that bill introduction, you see that I'm nervous and I take a deep breath and for me, that was the moment I realized, 'okay, there's no going back after this.' And I just like let my secret out into the world and it was terrifying. But at the same time afterwards when I thought, 'okay, well now everyone knows and we'll see what happens.' So many people came to me and started telling me their stories that I was shocked <laugh>.

And I thought, 'why aren't we talking about this more? Why aren't we more outraged?' So then when I testified in front of the House Ways and Means Committee after having told my story numerous times to a bunch of elected officials, I was used to it, and what really surprised me was how angry I became when telling it. I was having to reel in my anger. If you watch it <laugh>, I'm just like spitting those words out and at some point I'm like, 'okay, you gotta, you gotta reel this back in.' Because what I wanted to be doing is I wanted to scream at every single one of them and say, 'how dare you? How could you let this happen to me?' So even now, <laugh>, those emotions are still very raw <laugh>. And I think that was the most surprising to me. I did not expect to feel that intense rage at that moment and it was so hard to pull it back in <laugh>.

***Q: What an experience. So was that a pivotal moment for you in some way?***

**Wood:** So after I had told my story on Capitol Hill over and over again, I tell people, I think the biggest heartbreak for me is that elected officials know that stuff like this happens and it's not worth it to them to change it. Like we haven't reached the point to where it is worth it to them to address this, to work on this to say 'not again,' and that to me is heartbreaking. So I don't know what the answer is right now, but it's definitely something I think about regularly. <Laugh>.

***Q: Yeah. I'm curious, Rebecca, why do you think that is that we haven't reached the point, or that our elected officials are allowing this to happen? What do you think the block or barrier is?***

**Wood:** One thing I've learned in politics is follow the money. See who funds who, who's their contributors, who gives to who and if they go dark money, there's a reason why they're going dark money.

***Yeah, it's kind of the way our political system is set up is like, people wanna continue to stay in office, and so they're willing to do whatever it takes. There's something warped about how that works <laugh> like, and I think, you know, that's why campaign finance reform is so important too.***

**Wood:** I saw an amazing tweet or comment or something on social media over the last few days. Gosh, I'm not on social media very much anymore, <laugh> because of law school and parenting and stuff. But every now and then I'll peek in and I saw one that said, 'at this point, Congress is an arms dealer. We don't have health care. We don't have housing. We don't have education, but we're funding wars' and I thought 'how powerful, but how disturbingly true.'

***Q: I also wanted to ask you about your decision to go to law school. So tell me about that.***

**Wood:** Okay, so like I said, my daughter's birth threw me in the policy world. That happened in 2017 when she at the time had a G-tube and the (Affordable Care Act) came under attack. And if the ACA was repealed, then she would become uninsurable. And I had no idea how I was going to feed her if that happened. And that was my first time on Capitol Hill and then while I was up there, it kind of

snowballed into Medicare for All work because I saw that what happened to me was policy failure, not fate or anything as I thought it to be prior to that. And when my daughter and I moved to Massachusetts, I kept running into all of these things that were policy issues, like universal school meals or like student loans – issues like that. And I joke that I have a policy problem now <laugh>, because all I see is policy and I want to fix it and change it. So after working on universal school meals and a couple other things, I realized that I was not going to be able to let issues go and if I was going to continue to get involved in policy work, I needed to go to law school to get better at it and so here I am.

***Q: Wow, that's such an interesting choice though 'cause you could have gone into public policy or something like that. Why did you choose the law school route?***

**Wood:** I chose the law school route because it seemed to address the things I wanted to know more about. When I was a single mom – I currently live with my partner now so I don't really consider myself a single mom – but when I was a single mom, my neighbors would run into housing issues with their landlords and I thought, 'oh, I wish I knew the law. I wish I could fight this for you or help you out, or at least steer you in the direction.' And then I ran into an issue with my daughter's school, and when I was having this dispute, I would fight tooth and nail and even though I was right legally in arguing with them, they just would not budge.

So I reached out to a local organization called Mass Advocates for Children, or I guess it's a state organization, Massachusetts Advocates for Children, and as soon as their lawyer called to get more information about the situation, they called me and decided to, they (said) 'Ms. Wood, we've decided to see your way' <laugh>. And it's like, 'oh, did you now?' So there was also that power to back up the words in being a lawyer. Somebody asked me if I was going to take the bar because I am mostly interested in policy work. And I said, 'of course, because otherwise you're like a declawed cat.<laugh>.'

***Q: And so where ultimately do you see yourself once you finish law school. What would be your dream job?***

**Wood:** That is an interesting question because when I entered law school, I just wanted to learn the things law school provides so that I could be better at what I was already doing. I was working as a private contractor just for different organizations and different elected officials. I would do policy consulting type stuff, and I wanted to be better at it and so law school seemed (like) that avenue. But now that I am in law school, I got this fellowship over the summer from the Rapport Center for Law and Public Policy at Boston College, and I am interning at the Attorney General's office and so I'm looking forward to exploring that and maybe a career in government or something along those lines might be a good fit.

It's tough to say <laugh> because I've been called stubbornly principled <laugh>. So it's tough to find a good fit <laugh> when it's like that and I really enjoyed private contract work because I could work on the things that were important to me and not have to work on things in an organization that maybe I didn't agree with or something to that effect. So I am honestly not entirely sure where I will end up. I'm just kind of following <laugh> life where it goes.

***Q: So at what point did you become a single-payer, Medicare-for-All activist and why?***

**Wood:** Oh, it was actually a lot of little moments. During the 2017 ACA fight, my daughter loves this band, Dispatch, and we saw a bunch of their shows, and we were in Austin for one of their shows in 2017, and we had some time to kill. So we went to the visitor center and I was chit chatting with the woman at the visitor center, and she asked if I'd fill out a survey, and she explained that that's how they got their funding. So when I filled out the survey, I was like, 'yes, we left here and did lots of shopping and spent lots of money in the town <laugh>.' And she goes, 'oh, that'll look so good for us.' And I said, yeah, I know, I know how politicians think and what gets funding <laugh>. So we started talking about politics, and then she mentioned that right around the corner was Senator (John) Cornyn and Senator (Ted) Cruz's office.

And I said, 'oh, well, we should stop by <laugh>.' So Charlie and I made a letter to drop off at both Cornyn and Cruz's office. And I remember Cruz's office, it was in a federal building, so we weren't even allowed in the building. Like they had to call their staffer to come down and hear our spiel and get the letter. And at that

moment while I was standing there waiting, I thought, 'no wonder these guys can back such unreasonable gun policy. They live in these gun-free gated communities. They have these office buildings that nobody can enter. They don't have to worry about these things. And then it clicked. I thought, 'the only way we are going to have healthcare justice is if the guys writing the policy have to live by it.' And so that thought was there. And then over the summer, doing the fight for the ACA the week before the vote to repeal, Charlie and I were standing outside of the (U.S.) Capitol while they were voting to proceed with the vote to repeal.

And I was standing out there with Charlie, and it was heartbreaking because it was proceeding and it really felt like we were going to lose and I remember crying because I was heartbroken and I was talking to my friend Ben Wickler, and I explained to him that this was bad. Our lives were already bad and I told him about my mouth and I told him about everything we had lost and how bad was it going to get now when I was worried that I wouldn't be able to feed her. And then the vote happens and then we win <laugh> against the ACA repeal. And I was talking to Ben again and he said, 'don't you feel amazing?' And I said, 'no, Ben, I don't.' And he said, why not? And I said, I don't know. I was hoping to feel some closure.

And he said, 'what do you need to make that happen?' And I said, 'I don't know. Let me think about it.' And then, I think it was three days later or something to that effect, I texted him out of the blue. I said, 'I want it all, I want everybody covered.' And so then I started looking at universal healthcare ideas or <laugh> plans that were out there. And Medicare for All seemed to be the one that made the most sense, or single-payer health care. It wasn't called Medicare for All until September, 2017. But that seemed to make the most sense. And so I started fighting for it and it continues <laugh>. Sometimes it's more intense than others. Right now it's kind of at a lull while I am at law school but I kind of consider it sharpening my swords. <Laugh>.

***Q: I love that. Yeah. No, obviously this issue is so close and near and dear to your heart that I imagine you'll always, you'll always be an advocate, whether it's, you know, doing a podcast or maybe attending a rally.***

**Wood:** Oh no, we're going to win. I'm not always going to be an advocate. We are going to win <laugh>.

I fully believe that it will just take time like everything else.

***Q: As an activist that's been personally affected by our broken and callous healthcare system, what do you think it will take to win single payer both in Massachusetts and in the nation?***

**Wood:** That's such a tough question, because we can sit here and plot and plan but all it takes is one simple moment to just get the ball rolling and to push through with that momentum and where that moment comes, it's impossible to say or predict. So I think it's a matter of continuous organizing, waiting for that moment and pouncing on it when it happens.

***It's almost like what you've done with your life, pouncing on these opportunities and moments. When you were in Austin at the Dispatch concert, and you found out about the two senators' offices that were around the corner and you're like, 'let's go. Let's deliver a letter about the ACA.'***

**Wood:** I was so worried then that that was all that was on my mind, so I think probably in addition to organizing, keeping it fresh on people's minds, keeping people educated so when that moment comes, we can pounce.

***Thank you, Rebecca Wood.***

*Do you have a personal story you'd like to share about our 'wack' healthcare system? Contact us through our website at [www.heal-ca.org](http://www.heal-ca.org).*

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