

# DR. ASHLEY BLAKE

## A PhD in Persistence

### Being a Mom and Founding a Gold Standard Pediatric Therapy Center

*Dr. Ashley Blake is an entrepreneur, mother, wife, and successful leader. In 2021, she received the 16<sup>th</sup> annual RUBY Award that recognizes the upward, bright, and young. Additionally, in 2021 her pediatric therapy center was selected as a Michigan top 50 company to watch. She hopes to inspire women, mothers, and individuals to follow their dreams and be persistent in accomplishing goals that lead to changing their family's legacy.*

#### **Persistence Is Not EASY!**

I grew up in a middle-class family that taught me the concept of a strong work ethic. My father worked a full-time position during the week at a local community center. On the weekends, he operated a lawn care business with the help of myself and my sister. As school-age children, we were up every Saturday and Sunday mowing lawns, helping my father build a business.

My father and mother were the image of persistence. Over the years, with little to no marketing, my father built his small company to be a high-quality, customer referral-based company. His business was known in our hometown as the company that not only completed quality work but cared for its clients. He persistently pursued his love for being outdoors and serving elderly citizens daily through his working years. Every weekend, he taught my sister and me customer care and to persistently seek out a career that you love even when your outer circle or family does not agree. A strong work ethic and persistence to complete tasks even when they seemed impossible was pounded into our heads every weekend from 7 AM to 5 PM.

Growing up with this mindset allowed me to overcome future obstacles that others may not have been able to. I credit my work ethic to my parents who modeled for their children strong work ethics and persistently taught the importance of caring for customers and the quality of the work that you perform.

#### **Persistence Is Hard!**

My daughter was born during the first year of my bachelor's and my son came along shortly after in my fourth and final year of my bachelor's. To graduate on time, I encountered a challenging semester that final year where the classes

and scheduling did not accommodate a commuting mother attempting to nurse her son to his first birthday.

In the summer months, every college student starts to plan out the fall semester. This was my final semester, and commuting two hours to school round trip made scheduling even more complicated as I tried to travel fewer days and bundle my classes when the opportunity presented itself. During this time, online classes were not popular or available for students working towards the degree of my choice. My son was at his peak for eating, and nursing at least three times per day was not a choice but rather a demand from my body and a necessity for his development.

I finally created a schedule where all my classes lined up to accommodate only two days of traveling to the university. These were 14-hour days with my class schedule and commute time. I would need to pump a minimum of once per day while on campus just to not be in pain and to allow my body to continue making milk for my son. I was off with my big plan, a schedule that would fit my graduation timeline and my family's needs. I was excited, especially after I had redirected my graduation plans by a semester with the beautiful surprise pregnancy of my son.

When I discussed my schedule with my department advisor, she said, "Well, Ashley, this schedule will work, and you can graduate on time." Cheerful and ready to tell my husband about the good news, I turned and asked her if the department would have a location where I could pump once a day so I could continue to nurse my son and finish the semester to graduate with my bachelor's.

She told me there was not an available room in the department, and a professor's office would be the only place she could think of that would be private and available. Here is where persistence became a game changer for me as a professional working with others that did not share the same values, goals, or vision. I am optimistic and always try to see the bright side when others see a dead end. Outside of scheduling, the university, which I was paying thousands of dollars to attend, was struggling to help this working, college-career, breastfeeding mother of two kids under two years of age. I was determined that this semester was possible with a little bit of support.

I asked a few professors about using their office, but they were hesitant to give me an office key and could not guarantee their semester schedule or office hours. One of the professors suggested that I check with the student life program to see if this situation had ever come up before and if they had solutions.

The next day, I called the office of student life, and the coordinator could only recommend the campus multi-stall restrooms. I am not overly concerned with germs, but I would be damned if I was going to pump breast milk in the main building with students and professionals walking in and out of the restroom. I did not feel right in terms of respect, and I was not about to jeopardize passing bathroom germs to my son from a university with a significant size campus. This was not an option I was willing to accept!

I asked the coordinator one more time, “Are you sure there are no single-use bathrooms on this campus?”

“No, I am sorry there are no individual restrooms.” I just could not believe this to be true. I did not want to choose between nursing my son and finishing my education which would allow me to follow my career plans! I did not come this far to let a little challenge stop me.

After a week of persistently walking across campus, making phone calls, and scheduling appointments to discuss this with managers in different departments, I was exhausted. I still remember the phone call and joy in my heart when someone said, “Ashley, this is not that big of a deal, and we will figure this out. Just give me one day, and I will have a room for you. I was relieved and excited to find one person willing to help a mother, student, wife, and family achieve their dreams by helping in a little way.

The director of the disability center opened a testing room for me every Tuesday and Thursday for the entire semester. She made me feel comfortable, respected, and important. The student working the front desk knew me by name, helped me put a piece of paper over the window of the door to help preserve privacy every day, and even offered to store my milk in the lounge refrigerator if needed. Wow! All it took was persistence and finding one person that shared my passion for education, motherhood, and nursing to achieve the goal of graduating with my bachelor’s with two children under two in five years.

### **Persistence ALWAYS WINS!**

During my childhood, I was always persistent with certain ideas and concepts. Finding a room where I could pump the final semester of my bachelor’s degree was my adult moment that allowed me to advance to a higher level of persistence. I had managers, coordinators, professors, and other highly respected individuals telling me my vision was not possible, that they did not see a solution for me. Seeking out what I wanted, even if the majority did not see my vision, made me unstoppable.

This experience taught me a valuable lesson. Rise above and never stop persistently seeking out your passion and vision for areas that you know are right for you or your family! This was a pivotal moment for me as a mother,

student, and career-oriented individual. I was never going to allow anyone or any program to determine my future.

I was accepted into an accelerated master's program at the same university and finished in two years with two children under five years of age. Rising above and taking on these challenges persistently provided the proof to other professors that my family, barriers, and other circumstances would not stop me from pursuing my dream of obtaining my PhD. When it came time, my professors were all willing to provide a letter of recommendation to my doctoral program because they observed me achieving goal after goal no matter what obstacle was thrown my way.

### **Persistence in Education, Life, and Careers!**

I was accepted into a doctoral program with a research assistantship that paid for my tuition and provided a stipend. During the second year of my program, the department started a new applied behavior analysis (ABA) program, which was relatively new to most professionals in the department.

For four years, I worked with two young boys on the autism spectrum and learned about the different types of therapies available. The applied behavior analysis (ABA) program was one of those therapies that cost an abundance of money. Insurance typically did not cover the expenses or charges for services, so there was little awareness or education about applied behavior analysis (ABA). This type of therapy was known to help children with autism learn applied skills through a systematic teaching procedure, and in my four years of working with these families and the two young boys with autism, I felt a calling to pursue this area of specialization in my doctoral degree.

This would require me to attend clinical classes and add on some extra expenses. I asked the chair of the department if there would be any possibility for me to enroll in this new therapy program. I was advised to apply and interview for a spot.

I was excited to finally decide on my area of specialization and know that this was the right path for me. Thankfully, through the 18-month ABA program, my husband, family, and children sacrificed time with me. I was gone every evening and two days during the week, and I worked all day as a research assistant while commuting four hours both ways. I put 300,000 miles on my car but finished the program with a boiling passion for applied behavior analysis and the lifelong changes I could make with families and their children implementing these evidence-based, individualized teaching strategies and therapy concepts.

In the meeting where professors selected the first cohort students for the program, there were a few people on the committee that did not believe I

could pull off my research assistant position, standard PhD coursework, and my specialization classes in ABA. Persistence paid off again! Yes, I finished my PhD and passed my board certification to become a board-certified behavior analyst.

### **Persistence Always Pays Off!!**

My children were able to observe me complete these challenges by persistently seeking ways to climb mountains. I was able to prove to those who doubted my abilities that I was strong, I was capable, and with the right team in place, I could make anything happen!

Persistently seeking my dreams and the support of family and those who believed in me changed my life and my family's legacy. I was the first person on my side of the family to complete a college degree. I created a legacy for my family by demonstrating that education and passion can be a game changer. My children discuss education as if it is not an option. Most importantly, completing my AA, BS, MS, PhD, and board certification changed the course for my immediate family, extended family, employees, and the families we serve today.

### **Persistence and Patience Make an Unbeatable Combination!**

Education and experience provided me and my family with the opportunity to start our own business. We founded Encompass Therapy Center that incorporates child development, family studies, early childhood education, speech, feeding, and applied behavior analysis. Encompass is unique because of the specializations of behaviors, speech, and feeding. We are considered specialists in these areas.

Encompass employs 35 full-time staff, including myself and my husband. It is successful due to the persistence of team members who go beyond the basic standards in the pediatric therapy fields. We are the only ABA center in our region that has obtained a three-year national accreditation. And we are the only therapy center that designed and constructed a facility focused on creating an environment that is the gold standard for pediatric therapy environments, including therapy rooms with windows, a 4,000 square foot playground, and a classroom that incorporates learning stations, natural light, and nature-based elements.

We persistently find ways to improve the quality of care for children receiving pediatric therapy even if certain groups or individuals cannot see our vision. We know based on research and best practice guidelines that our vision is providing children and families with the best treatment outcomes, even if it takes going the extra mile to provide this standard of care. We have a leadership team that persistently seeks to rise above challenges and be a game-changing

company! Teamwork and persistence allow the therapy center to grow beyond measure and fulfill the lives of those who we serve and employ! I am grateful that, in 2021, I received the 16<sup>th</sup> annual RUBY Award that recognizes the upward, bright, and young leaders serving the mid-Michigan area, and our company was selected as a Michigan top 50 company to watch.

I am blessed to have been given each of these opportunities, and having a team has been one of the most important elements to my achieving each of my degrees, milestones, and business goals.

To those who are struggling to find a solution to a problem, BE PERSISTENT! I have gotten to where I am through hard work and dedication. Persistence has been the number one skill that has changed life for me, my family, and those I continue to serve. Persistence is not easy, but it will always win.



*Dr. Ashley Blake is an established business owner, mother, wife, and CEO of Encompass Therapy Center. To inquire about her as a guest speaker in the field of pediatric therapy or entrepreneurship or as an inspirational speaker for women, mothers, and non-traditional college students, contact her at [anblake@encompasstherapycenter.com](mailto:anblake@encompasstherapycenter.com).*



**Tweetable:** Stop, listen, find a solution, and be PERSISTENT. You may not be able to appreciate the hard work in the moment, but in the end, it always pays off! Small steps of success will lead to great achievements over time.

"Energy and persistence conquer all things."  
– Benjamin Franklin