

Women and Diversity Interview

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2012 G. Jeanette Thorbecke Award winner

Have you always been interested in scientific research?

I have been interested in scientific research since I was about 10 years old. My elementary school offered a program to students in grades 5 and 6 to learn about science. I had the opportunity to “work” in three different research labs through that program and was hooked at a very early age. I was fascinated by our ability to work at the leading edge of science in our field of choice and spent the rest of my school experiences trying out different fields of science.

Can you give us a brief description of your current research and what most excites you about it now?

I am a biomedical researcher and my research program includes basic, translational, and clinical research. My favorite cell type is the macrophage and my favorite process is inflammation. We currently have two major research foci in the lab. In our first project, we are investigating the potential to use ex vivo derived macrophages polarized to a regulatory (anti-inflammatory) or alternatively activated (healing) phenotype to reduce inflammation and promote tissue restitution in chronic inflammatory diseases. In a second project, we are investigating the cause of intestinal inflammation in the SHIP deficient mouse, a new mouse model of Crohn's Disease-like intestinal inflammation that we described, along with Bill Kerr's lab in 2011. In my lab, we always keep our eyes open for opportunities to identify and validate new drug targets or new therapeutic strategies to treat inflammatory diseases. I love this quote from Albert Szent-Gyorgi, who won the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1937. “Discovery consists of seeing what everybody has seen and thinking what nobody else has thought.”

During your graduate and post-doc years did you have mentor(s) that helped guide you along the way?

I have been really fortunate to have had tremendous and supportive mentors through my entire research career. I have been in four different labs through my MSc, PhD, and two postdoctoral fellowships. Each supervisor that I have had has been a unique model of success and I have tried to incorporate aspects from each of my lab experiences into my own research program. My hope is that in doing this, I will be able to share some of the best parts of my training experiences with my own trainees.

As a relatively new principal investigator at the University of British Columbia, I actually still have a mentor and actively seek out advice and mentorship from specific colleagues as needed. For me, I envision that being a mentee will be a life-long experience that will allow me to continue to grow and improve throughout my career. I have sometimes been surprised by the sources of mentors as they have not been restricted to immediate supervisors and I have consistently been impressed with the generosity of the scientific community in offering their time and insight as mentors.

What was (were) the biggest challenge(s) you faced in pursuing your career?

I think that a big challenge that I faced and that will be faced by more of our trainees over time is the competition for relatively few jobs as Principal Investigators. I was really fortunate to have been in some great labs and to have had some great opportunities that allowed me to be here. My strategy to deal with that challenge was simply to work hard and keep my nose to the grindstone but I am sure that there was definitely some luck involved for me. I think that today, we need to be creative and open-minded about how we are going to make our contributions and look broadly for the wide range of opportunities that our science expertise provides.

Do you feel that being a woman in science came with advantages or disadvantages? What were they?

I think that there have been both advantages and disadvantages to being a woman in science. It is sometimes hard to separate out what is “being a woman” from what is “being me” when I think about the advantages. However, I do think that we, as women, bring a different perspective and approach to science than our male colleagues and it is really important to have our voices in the conversation. The women that I work with are consistently creative and nurturing. That is also true of some men that I work with but it seems to me that it is less often “the rule.”

A disadvantage that I have faced is a lack of role models. There were very few female PIs when I was training and many of them had different life trajectories than I was planning. My partner and I always planned to have children and figuring out the timing of that without role models was tough. We ended up just doing what worked for our family and that turned out to be a great decision for us. I had a daughter toward the end of my PhD and a son during my second post-doctoral fellowship. For some reason, women are still under-represented in senior positions in science. For e.g., even though many women are completing PhDs and post-doctoral fellowships, there still seem to be fewer women applying for faculty positions. I often joke that women are just too smart to want this job (it is a lot of work) but there is obviously much more to it than that. It is everyone’s responsibility to help determine what the barriers are that women are facing and to keep moving forward to break down those barriers. I hope that the conversation can start and continue in forums like this one.

A second disadvantage that I have faced is sexism. This has been subtle, rather than blatant. Fortunately, there are a number of resources to help support women through these sorts of challenges. For me, I have focused on surrounding myself with good people that I want to work with.

What strategies do you use to maintain balance in your life?

I have no solution to this and this is a constant struggle for me. I will share that when my son was 8, he was asked by his teacher to write a report outlining the hobbies and interests of his family members. My husband and daughter came off as very interesting people. On the other hand, my evening hobby was catching up on work that I did not get done during the day and my weekend hobby was catching up on work that I did not get done during the week. In all fairness, I think that it was right in the middle of grant writing season. I enjoy my family time very much and really make sure that I am engaged when I am at home with my family. I also enjoy quilting with a group of girlfriends that meet twice per month from September through June.

What advice would you give to female graduate students that are interested in a career as an academic scientist?

I really love my job and sincerely think that we are among luckiest people in the world. We get to pursue our interests and challenge ourselves and our thinking constantly. I also sincerely feel that what we do is critically important and I think that careers that can make all of those claims are rare. You have to know that this career choice is not without its challenges. I feel that the past 5 years of my life as an independent Principal Investigator

have been the busiest and most challenging of my life. However, if you are interested in taking the plunge, I would say go for it and jump in with both feet. While full of challenges, these past 5 years have also been extraordinarily rewarding.