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Phil Stahl

As the first man to win the ASCB's Women in Cell Biology Senior Career Recognition Award, Phil Stahl of the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis finds the honor both gratifying and humbling. The WICB Senior Award was established to honor "a woman or a man" with a strong record as a senior researcher and as an advocate for women in science. "There are men who are contributing to the changes we're seeing in how women make their careers in cell biology, so I guess this is an important thing to happen. Still," Stahl admits, "it's a bit unusual."

It's also well merited, says WICB committee member Sue Shafer. "The Senior Award is for cell biologists with outstanding science but who have another dimension as a mentor who fosters the careers of others, be they men or women. I think Phil isn't the only man for whom it's true. Phil's just the first to be recognized this way."

WICB Chair Zena Werb agrees matter-of-factly. "Good mentorship is not specific to gender. With this award, we wanted to honor a great scientist who is also a great mentor. Sometimes that turns out to be a woman. This year, it turned out to be a man." Phil Stahl is also known as one of the nicest people in cell biology, says Werb. "But being a nice guy is one thing. Being effective is another, and Phil is a nice guy who has been highly effective. It's been recognized in St. Louis and now, with this award nationally."

Appointed department head in 1984, Stahl renamed the group Cell Biology & Physiology and set out to diversify its research, its faculty and its students. Stahl was an early advocate for "women's" issues at Washington University, including hiring outside the "old boy" network, starting the medical school's first on-campus day care center, and getting serious about pay equity. The department, which had no tenure-track women on the faculty when Stahl first came to St. Louis in 1971, now has a faculty that is 25 percent female and a requirement that women make up 50 percent of the candidates for faculty openings. Stahl has also pushed the university-wide Division of Biology and Biomedical Sciences into serious recruitment of minority students and faculty.

Breaking new ground has been standard in Phil Stahl's career. The fifth of nine children and the first in his family to attend college, Stahl grew up in the tiny blue-collar town of Warwood in West Virginia's industrial panhandle, where, he says, the "usual career trajectory in those days was a job in the steel mill." His academic career began almost on a whim when Stahl enrolled at the very last moment at nearby West Liberty State College. His life—and his original accounting major—were soon changed by an extraordinary biology teacher. Rose Cerroni was a newly-minted Ph.D. from Vanderbilt, teaching at West Liberty to enable her to care for an ailing parent nearby. "I was just swept off my feet by her class," says Stahl.

Now a biology major, Stahl put himself through West Liberty by living at home and working evenings as a salesman in a women's shoe store. After graduating, Stahl went straight for his Ph.D. in Pharmacology at West Virginia University. After a brief career in

“space biology” as a NASA-funded fellow at the University of Missouri, Stahl landed a fellowship in Vanderbilt’s Department of Molecular Biology to study the enzymes that control bone degradation. He arrived just as the entire field was knocked on its head by the discovery of the lysosomal storage system, the cell’s mechanism for collecting and digesting dangerous wastes. Stahl’s search for the key that allowed lysosomal enzymes into cells led to a faculty position at the Washington University medical school in 1971 and in 1976 to the discovery of a protein called the mannose-receptor. The discovery was unusual in that it led directly to a new clinical treatment. Gaucher disease is a rare but extremely painful spleen and bone disorder caused by a genetic defect that leaves macrophages without a key enzyme to perform protein and lipid digestion. Attempts to directly inject Gaucher patients with the missing enzyme failed until drug designers realized that they could use Stahl’s mannose-receptor as a target. By attaching a mannose sugar to a synthetic form of the enzyme, they were able to deliver a therapeutic dose to the macrophages.

Stahl’s earliest research work on NASA’s “Bio-Satellite” Program in Missouri had two unusual consequences, according to friends and colleagues. The first was a now legendary tale of Stahl’s attempt to deliver to NASA a squirrel he been preparing for space flight who escaped en route and holed up deep in the delivery van’s heater. The second was Phil meeting Sharon, who was a part-time tour guide at the university’s NASA-funded nuclear reactor.

Today Sharon Stahl is an associate dean in Washington’s undergraduate College of Arts and Sciences. The Stahls have three children---Damien, 33, a businessman; Eva Marie, 30, a doctoral student in health policy at Brandeis; and Christian, 27, a computer consultant who recently determined to retrain as a nurse. Phil Stahl says watching his wife’s struggle to balance family, finish a doctorate in history, and then build her own academic career made him acutely aware of the inequalities women faced on campuses everywhere.

The situation may be changing somewhat, says Stahl, but many obstacles that faced his wife now face their daughter. “I know Eva wants to be an academic,” says Phil Stahl. “She has a baby now and her husband has a very demanding job. They work closely together but I can see how hard it is to maintain the kind of intensity you need to be competitive.” The struggle for women is far from over, Stahl says. “You don’t need to look around very far even today to see there are still glass ceilings and special pressures on women.”

Phil Stahl himself continues to juggle the demands of leadership of the department, education and mentoring, his own research and family. Over his nearly 20-year tenure as department head, he has recruited most of the department’s current faculty. He and his faculty have played a key role in the teaching mission of the institution. Stahl is also currently serving as director of the Division of Biology and Biomedical Sciences which oversees all PhD and MD/PhD education in the Biomedical Sciences at Washington University. As a scientist, Stahl’s research continues to focus on the process of endocytosis. Just recently, he and his colleagues discovered a new family of proteins that

provides an understanding of how growth factor receptors are internalized into the endocytic pathway. These achievements aside, family has always come first for Phil Stahl, both his own and his large extended family of scientists, colleagues and friends.