

1995

Robert Palazzo

Born in Abruzzi, Italy, Robert Palazzo came to the United States at the age of five with his brother and parents. Like many other immigrant families, the Palazzos settled in Dearborn, Michigan.

Attending high school in the shadow of the Ford Motor Plant, once the largest industrial complex in the world, Palazzo's blue-collar high school was geared more toward preparing young people for a job in heavy industry than in the arts and sciences. He considered becoming an architect, and worked in industrial design for construction companies following graduation from high school. Palazzo dropped out of Henry Ford Community College, expecting to get drafted in the Vietnam War, but the draft notice never came. Working for some years in construction and machinery repair, Palazzo decided to go back to school, enrolling at Wayne State University, an opportunity he was acutely aware was not open to many of his friends who would not return alive from Vietnam. He finished his degree in 1979, majoring in Biology and Chemistry.

In graduate school at Wayne State, under the guidance of John Taylor and noted chemist T.T. Tchen, Palazzo studied the biochemical regulation of directed organelle translocation in lower vertebrate chromatophores, focusing on organelle-cytoskeletal interactions. Palazzo played a key role in the application of video-microscopy to study organelle movements in these cells in collaboration with the late Robert Day Allen. Palazzo's graduate work culminated in the use of detergent-insoluble cytoskeletal models to demonstrate that phosphorylation of an organelle-protein regulates its interaction with the cytoskeleton.

Palazzo spent the summer of 1983 in the physiology course at the Marine Biological Laboratory at Woods Hole where he was inspired by the work and teachings of Bob and Ann Goldman, Thoru Pederson, Richard Valle, Marty Garovsky, and Jim and Anna Spudich. Up to that time, Palazzo had been thinking about returning to industry or medical school, but the physiology course at Woods Hole changed his goals. Palazzo characterizes his commitment to science in part as a personal struggle against his blue-collar background: he wanted to confront and dispel his fear that he could not compete in academics. At Woods Hole he had the chance to compete with peers who respected his work. One mentor and peer, Bill Brinkley, calls Palazzo a great teacher who spends his summers at the Woods Hole Marine Lab researching mitosis in surf clams and teaching physiology.

Palazzo did his postdoc at the University of Virginia (UVA) starting in 1985 under Lionel Rebhun whom he met while at Woods Hole. At UVA he focused on the study of cell division. His major work during those post-doctoral years was to reactivate isolated mitotic apparatus in vitro so that specific assays could be carried out under defined conditions to clarify the molecular basis of spindle function.

At the University of Kansas since 1992, Palazzo is now Associate Professor there, where his major objective is to understand the basic biochemical regulatory pathways controlling the centrosome during the cell cycle in eukaryotes. He has developed in vitro assays that can be used to identify and purify molecules that regulate specific aspects of centrosome function. Palazzo hopes his work will be extended by determining the presence of similar molecules in systems that offer the potential for genetic manipulation.

One of the most active volunteers in the Congressional Liaison Committee's political education efforts, Palazzo developed an early awareness of politics as his parents became naturalized American citizens. In 1989, Palazzo started becoming politically active motivated by the fear, shared by many of his colleagues, of the limited funds available for investigators. A fond memory is meeting the late Representative William Natcher of Kentucky, the NIH's legendary advocate who served in Congress for 41 years and is remembered for his voting record in the House of Representatives and his reputation as a Southern gentleman of the traditional style.

Palazzo regrets the scientific community's traditional reluctance to engage in political affairs, but urges all scientists to become politically involved with activities like the Congressional Liaison Committee. Palazzo says he does not understand why people are reluctant or indifferent to such involvement, particularly with the situation as grave as it is currently. He is aware that many scientists believe their congressional interaction is inconsequential but insists that every scientist can make a significant difference.

Palazzo is also involved in the Science-Education Partnership at the University of Kansas. The program aims to heighten science awareness by explaining how research impacts the local community. He is also becoming active in local K-12 science education. Palazzo and his wife, Elizabeth, a former comptroller at Woods Hole, have a three-year old son, Alexander, and a fifteen-month old daughter, Isabella. Palazzo's passion for model electronic trains has been rekindled by Alexander's enthusiasm. In the best Italian tradition, the Palazzos enjoy good wine and love food and cooking. They claim the world's best recipe for homemade gnocci.