

1995

Sue Shafer

Sue Shafer has been a player in shaping funding for biomedical research since arriving at the NIH in 1974. Since 1989, Shafer has been the Associate Director for Extramural Activities at the National Institute of General Medical Sciences. She characterizes her role there as representing the scientific community to government and the government to the scientific community. Shafer began her career working with Ruth Kirschstein, who had just been appointed Director of NIGMS. Kirschstein calls Shafer a highly talented scientist administrator whose career has systematically developed over the last twenty years.

Her success is due to her great appreciation of the role of basic biology in improving health, her ability to articulate her positions, her keen mind, which is constantly absorbing new ideas and knowledge and, of great importance, her interpersonal skills. Prior to her present position, Shafer served as a Program Administrator in the Cellular and Molecular Basis of Disease Program at NIGMS; Chief of the Office of Program Planning and Evaluation, Division of Research Resources at the NIH; and Deputy Director and Acting Director in the Division of Basic Research at the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

Shafer finds many rewards in her job. Among them are facilitating the efforts of the bench scientists in the research community and facilitating the career growth of junior colleagues. She enjoys analyzing the NIH extramural grant-making process and working to improve its ability to support good science. Shafer is particularly proud of NIGMS's contributions to bringing the results of basic research to the bedside in a time frame that has dramatically shortened during the past 20 years. Shafer also works actively with Cliff Poodry, the new head of NIGMS's minorities program, to support minority institutions and the growing number of minority scientists.

Shafer had no idea that her early career choices would lead her to one of the top administrative posts at the NIH. She grew up in Illinois and wanted to become a medical doctor. She attended the University of Wisconsin, where Hans Ris was her pre-med advisor. A turning point for Shafer was when Ris persuaded her not to take a pre-med zoology course, but instead to enroll in a year-long zoology course because it was much more research-oriented. As a result of that course, she became more interested in biological research than in medical school. For safety's sake, after she received her bachelors degree, she got an education certificate, in case she needed to teach to earn her living. Realizing that women had opportunities in science besides teaching, Shafer pursued her Ph.D. at the University of Florida.

Her thesis, under the direction of John Brookbank, was on the effects of the paternal genome on early sea urchin development. From 1969 to 1970, Shafer did post-doctoral research on cell differentiation in cellular slime molds in the University of Florida laboratory of James Gregg. In 1970, Shafer went to Kalamazoo College in Michigan where her first husband had a teaching position. After searching unsuccessfully for a

position at nearby colleges and universities and at Upjohn, she concluded that there were few research opportunities in the area. Shafer lectured at Kalamazoo College and became Business Manager for the Society for Developmental Biology until she and her husband left Kalamazoo to go to the NIH in 1974.

She has remained in science administration there ever since. ASCB past-President Susan Gerbi remembers as a graduate student meeting Shafer while Shafer was at SDB. Gerbi would later have many other interactions with Shafer and is impressed with Shafer's calm, efficient manner. She never seems to get agitated and makes you feel everything is in order and will get done. Her efficiency, Gerbi says, makes her a person of action, not just of good will. Besides being a lovely person, Gerbi feels that Shafer's ability to synthesize problems into solutions is the mark of a great NIH administrator. Ruth Kirschstein notes that Shafer has a tremendous capacity to bring out the best in people, to find their hidden talents and help them to exploit these talents, to listen carefully to all sides of an issue, to make people feel important and to keep a sense of balance. She is a great friend and colleague. Shafer joined the ASCB while living in Kalamazoo and has attended virtually every Annual Meeting since the early 1970s. Shafer currently serves as Chair of the Women in Cell Biology Committee.

Conscious of her own and other women's past experiences, she takes the Committee's potential for contribution seriously, addressing issues such as glass ceilings, changing jobs, alternative careers, and the critical importance of mentoring. She thinks that she is typical in never realizing that she was mentoring or mentored but now knows how important informal interactions are for young women scientists in developing their careers. Shafer and her husband, Ric Shafer, who is Executive Officer of the National Center for Research Resources at the NIH, have one daughter, Beth, and a granddaughter, Mary, who, Shafer says, is nine-going-on-twenty-five. She and her husband have recently purchased a house in Cape May, on the Jersey Shore, and are busy refurbishing it. Shafer also enjoys cooking from around the world and starting each day on the Nordic Track. Shafer became an avid bird watcher after participating years ago in the Spring Birdwalk along the Chesapeake River near Great Falls, Maryland. She saw more than sixty types of birds and realized that besides enjoying the beauty of the birds, she enjoyed the relaxation and peacefulness of being outdoors. This experience turned a lifelong interest into a personal hobby.