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1998

Laura Williams

Laura Williams chose an atypical career. After completing her Ph.D. in Biochemistry at the University of California at Berkeley in 1994, she decided to start a family and to develop a career in science editing and writing. The decision was not easy, but she is convinced that it was right.

She attributes her interest in science to both her parents and to her grandfather. She recalls that, from the time I can remember, my mother was teaching me about biology. When I was a young girl my mother and I learned to identify every seashell on the beach. Later, once her daughters were in school, Williams mother became a middle school biology teacher. Williams grandfather, who worked for the Federal Reserve Bank, often took Laura as a girl to bird-watch in the swamp near their hometown of Westfield, New Jersey. Williams father, who worked for the New Jersey State Employment service, encouraged his daughters to excel academically.

Wanting Laura to stay close to home and her close-knit family and with private schools out of reach financially, Laura s parents urged her to attend Rutgers University, where Laura s two younger sisters would also go. At Rutgers, Williams began as an engineering student. She explains that, in my high school when you showed a proficiency in science you were encouraged to go to medical school or study engineering. She knew she did not want to be a doctor, so she chose engineering. She confesses to not being aware of other career options in biological science. But after taking a biochemistry class, she became fascinated with the subject, and began doing research in the laboratory of the professor who taught the class, Peter Kahn. Her undergraduate research naturally led her to pursue a doctorate. I didn t make a conscious decision to get a graduate degree, she explains, it just happened. Williams graduated from Rutgers with highest honors, was elected to Phi Beta Kappa, and was named a Henry Rutgers scholar.

Moving to Berkeley for graduate school was a difficult choice. To this day, Williams family is distressed that she and her husband live in California. Laura is the only member of her extended family to venture so far away from New Jersey, and she admits, I never thought I d be here as long as I have been.

Williams did her graduate research in Caroline Kane s lab, which Kane runs with her husband, Mike Chamberlin. Williams was attracted to Kane s research on gene expression and did her thesis work on transcription elongation factor TFIIS. Kane describes Williams as having a logical mind. She is always very clear and she has a knack for getting right to the issue. This clarity of thought, Kane believes, helped Williams make her difficult career move. Kane and Williams talked a great deal about this decision before Williams made it, and Kane is proud of her student s choice.

Williams acknowledges, I encountered a great deal of resistance from others in the department when I told them I was considering a non-traditional career path, away from bench science. Williams herself had doubts: I felt like I was letting people down, she confesses. She also found that other students in her program who were considering alternative careers were afraid to say anything about them to their thesis advisors. Williams notes gratefully that, Caroline was supportive from the beginning... whatever decision I made. The quality of the research and the stimulating atmosphere in Caroline and Mike s lab made me reconsider a research career, but I knew bench work was not for me. It did not fit my personality. I did not enjoy the rewards enough to make up for the frustrations.

Williams first considered science writing and editing as a career when she moderated and helped organize a panel discussion on alternative careers on campus. She was inspired to work on the event because there was little information about alternative careers available to graduate students. I was surprised to see how many of my fellow students came to the event, Williams says.

Kane proved to be invaluably supportive of Williams decision to follow a non-traditional career path. Kane served on the Women in Cell Biology Committee for the ASCB, which was searching for a column editor for the ASCB Newsletter s WICB section. Kane suggested Williams for the job, which she did voluntarily for two years. In this role Williams both wrote and recruited others to write about issues facing women in the field. The column has attracted critical acclaim from inside and outside the ASCB. Sue Shafer, immediate past Chair of the WICB Committee, says, I think that one of the most important developments during the first few years of the WICB Committee was putting that column together. Laura kept it going month after month, and worked on the articles both substantively and editorially . Shafer also notes that it was Williams idea to involve others to write articles for the WICB column in order to get a broader variety of topics and perspectives.

One factor that contributed to Williams move away from bench science was her plan to have children. Williams reflects that it is very difficult for people to become scientists and have a family, especially for women. It is draining to work at the bench. I know women who have done it when they were pregnant,

and I can t imagine how they managed. Then there is the issue of childcare. Scientists have to work such long hours, especially early in their careers when they are likely to have young children. She adds, years before I got pregnant I already felt uncomfortable with the idea of putting my child in day-care.

Williams always knew she wanted to have children. So it was a blow to her when she and her husband, Craig Fairchild, a postdoc in plant biology at UC Berkeley, were not able to conceive readily and had to consult with infertility specialists. Eighteen months later, Williams became pregnant with their daughter Tess. While she now looks back on that year and half as a relatively brief interlude when compared to the time it can take for some infertile couples to conceive, at the time it seemed intolerable.

Williams is now working at home as a freelance editor and caring for Tess, who is nine months old. Williams resigned as the WICB column editor, and is now the newsletter editor for UC Berkeley s Department of Molecular and Cell Biology. Randy Schekman, ASCB President-elect and Chair of UC Berkeley s Department of Molecular and Cell Biology explains that the initial purpose of the newsletter is informational for current and past undergraduates, graduates, and postdoctoral fellows. The Department is large and spread around the Berkeley campus and the newsletter should help to make us a more cohesive unit. I believe that newsletters of this sort may be under-explored possibilities for recent Ph.D. students who seek an entry-level position in scientific journalism. Williams is also editor of a CD-ROM entitled The New Genetics: Courseware for Physicians, created by fellow WICB committee member Sara Tobin of the Stanford University Center for Bio-medical Ethics, and Ann Boughton of Thumbnail Graphics. Following her experience working on the WICB column, Williams is confident about her new challenges.

Williams is very pleased with her current projects because they allow her to care full-time for her child. However, the choices she has made have been difficult. She confesses, I don t always feel proud of my career decisions: sometimes I feel apologetic for leaving the academic track and for working part-time at home in order to care for Tess.

After taking care of Tess and working, there isn t time for much else. But Williams would love to find the time to cross-country ski and rollerblade , favorite pastimes of Williams and Fairchild. But mostly she enjoys her time with Tess. Williams says, she is such a happy, contented baby.