

[<< back](#) 

1999

Norine E. Noonan

Norine Noonan has parlayed her training in cell biology to become a senior government official as Assistant Administrator for Research & Development at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, a position she has held for a year.

Noonan was raised on Long Island, NY. Neither of her parents was able to go to college due to the Depression. Her father commuted to work every day on the Long Island Railroad to New York City. Her mother stayed at home while the children were young, but eventually resumed work as a nurse. Her parents encouraged Norine's early interest in the sorts of science that most children enjoy: astronomy, dinosaurs and geology. She persuaded her father to take her to the City to visit the Museum of Natural History and the planetarium there "about as often as [her] siblings could stand." She particularly enjoyed the Hall of Dinosaurs and watching the planetarium show.

For college, Noonan chose the University of Vermont for two reasons: the beautiful campus, and the University's pre-vet program. She had hoped to enter Cornell's veterinary program but was rejected: the Dean of Admissions at the Vet School explained that he "didn't believe in women in veterinary medicine, because they were just taking slots away from men."

After less than a year in the pre-vet program, Noonan recalls being "hijacked" by the zoology department to work as a lab assistant. She fell in with the zoology graduate students, and changed her major to Zoology, minoring in Chemistry. Her general biology teacher suggested she look at Princeton for graduate school. Noonan was accepted to the cell biology program there, with not only tuition remission but a stipend of \$2,400 per year, making her "feel rich."

Noonan remembers Princeton with great fondness, a place where graduate students were treated well. "We weren't an afterthought as grad students are at many institutions," she recalls. Noonan believes that researchers at Princeton are advantaged by the fact that Princeton does not have a medical school, thus minimizing distractions. Noonan began her studies with Arnold Levine, but her primary mentor was Max Berger, who studied the cell membrane. After Noonan had been at Princeton for two years, Berger moved his lab to Switzerland. Noonan and the rest of the lab followed Berger to the new biology center at the University of Basel. She returned a year later to complete her dissertation, enabling her to accept a position at the University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine.

Noonan admits that as a young faculty member she "hardly knew what she was doing," but felt fortunate to be at a new school that gave her a lot of freedom. Noonan taught small animal gross anatomy and assisted with large animal anatomy. The new school had drawbacks, however. There was no dedicated building for the Vet School, so she had to teach gross anatomy in the Medical School. At one point she and another young colleague were charged with embalming a pony for dissection. "We had to bring these embalmed ponies back to the lab on gurneys with their feet sticking straight up in the air through office space because there was no anatomy lab," shocking the office staff who had to witness the macabre caravan. Besides doing their own embalming, Noonan and her fellow faculty members also had to write their own dissection guide.

During her time at the University of Florida, Noonan became interested in issues of public policy. Her Congressman at that time, Rep. Don Fuqua (D), had become the Chairman of the Science Committee and had hired Harold Hansen from the University of Florida to his senior staff. During a trip to Washington for a veterinary meeting, Noonan met with Hansen and investigated sabbatical opportunities, which eventually led to Noonan receiving an American Chemical Society Congressional Science Fellowship. She was placed on the staff of the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science & Transportation, which gave her an opportunity to explore public policy without having to give up her scientific career. Some of the projects she worked on included National Science Foundation authorization and the daylight savings time extension. But the most important skill Noonan learned while on Capitol Hill was "the art of translation." Every technical issue had to be reduced to a one-page memo that anyone could understand, a talent not frequently required in science.

From Capitol Hill, Noonan was recruited to work for the Office of Management & Budget, which develops the executive branch budget. She was reluctant to go to the OMB because it was during the Reagan Administration, but she eventually did because of the "vast sway the OMB held to influence policy decisions at the time." Longtime ASCB member Mary Clutter, who is Assistant Director of the NSF, worked closely with Noonan when Noonan was appointed OMB budget examiner for the NSF. "We were thrilled to have a biologist in charge, someone who understood the value of an investment in science," Clutter recalls. In addition to the NSF, Noonan worked on the NASA and Smithsonian budgets, among others. She and her colleagues at the OMB would work to square the various federal agency budgets with the President's policy priorities. Noonan was responsible for compiling the background material for all R&D in the budget, a task for which her science training helped her tremendously. "You can take a

scientist or engineer and turn them into a public policy analyst, but it's difficult to do the reverse," she observes.

After ten years at the OMB, Noonan went back to Florida, eventually becoming Vice President for Research and Dean of the Graduate School at the small, private Florida Institute of Technology in Melbourne, Florida (conveniently five miles from the beach and a recent target of Hurricane Floyd). Although this was a very different kind of environment than Washington, the skills she learned on Capitol Hill proved helpful. Working with young faculty and interacting with bright students gave her the most satisfaction. She had an open door policy and the box of Kleenex on her desk had to be replaced often as students and others gravitated to her for advice and sympathy. Noonan particularly liked the small size of the institution, allowing every student hands-on experience, reminiscent of her days in Vermont.

Her longtime colleague Merton Bernfield of Harvard says of Noonan, "she pours herself into whatever she does, and in that way has marvelous experiences. She is also able to balance her many interests simultaneously, from aerobics to animals to friends, but always with a considerable commitment to science and with much respect for fair play and integrity."

Noonan's return to Washington was the result, as these things usually are, of people who knew people who knew her, and of the departure of a key EPA official. It wasn't until late in the recruitment process that Noonan realized that the position of Assistant Administrator is one of seven in the agency that must be confirmed by the Senate.

The Senate hearing on Noonan's appointment required her to learn a great deal about the EPA in a short time. She met with Members of Congress prior the hearing, and was well prepared for the process by the EPA staff. As it turned out, the Senate confirmed her on the very last day of the 1998 Congressional session. At the moment she learned of her confirmation, she was in a moving van driving up from Florida, having sold her house there.

Noonan describes her position at the EPA as similar to a corporate Vice President for Research & Development. She is responsible for 2,000 people and a budget of \$540 million. Noonan oversees three headquarters offices, three national research laboratories and two national centers, all organized around a strategy of risk assessment and risk management to remediate environmental and human health problems. Her office is located in the new Ronald Reagan Building in downtown Washington, overlooking the old Post Master General's office, soon also to be occupied by the EPA. Noonan's organization is dispersed all over the country, from Narragansett, Rhode Island to Newport, Oregon. One of the largest concentrations of activity is in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, where the newest EPA facility is almost complete. The state-of-the-art building, located near the NIH National Institute for Environmental Sciences, will be one million square feet. Noonan is particularly pleased with the EPA's new graduate and post-doctoral programs, bringing young scientists into the agency to give them a sense of how it works.

EPA Administrator Carol Browner says of her colleague, "Norine Noonan is a widely respected professional in the scientific community. Her contributions are essential in this Administration, which is aggressively committed to making sound science the foundation of our policies to protect public health and the environment. We are fortunate to have her on our team."

Noonan declines to dwell on what might happen to her job as a presidential appointee at the end of the Clinton Administration. She says, "I'm not going to think about that today, because I have a job to do here." She does speculate that one day she might go back to a university or do something completely different.

Never having lost her love of animals, Noonan has three Basset Hounds, one of which was rescued from a shelter, and two cats, both rescued as well. This year marks her 25th year in the Basset Hound Club of America and she is active in her local chapter as well. Noonan also enjoys community theater, and is currently in a production of *Lend Me a Tenor*. In fact, she chose to live in Vienna, Virginia so she could be near the performing arts park, Wolf Trap, to easily access shows and concerts. Noonan admits that another consideration in choosing where to live was proximity to a Dunkin' Donuts. Her fantasy is to own a Dunkin' Donuts franchise, so that she can put her "deep product knowledge" to good use.