Excited About Science

My parents were first-generation Americans. They expected that the boys would do something professionally and the girls would be homemakers. I always had an inherent interest in science. As a girl, I never wanted to with play dolls. I liked to go around the neighborhood and pick berries and things off the ground and stir them up into mixtures to see what would happen.

In fifth grade, I read the autobiography of Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman to receive a medical degree in the United States. It was so inspirational. I told my mother and grandmother that I wanted to be a doctor. They thought it was so funny, they laughed. It wasn't at all derisive; to them, it was one of the cute things children say.

I clearly remember when my fifth-grade science teacher in Chicago one day said, "Set aside your books. We're going to talk about one thing: what is life?" We tried to define if something was alive. What if it moves, for example? Well, there are lots of things that move that aren't alive. That had an influence on me. The fact that we are now being able to discover what life is, it's breathtaking, and that I can participate in that is fabulous.

My mother wanted me to go to college to marry a college-educated man. My father built houses. He didn't understand why I should go to college. At night, he read the encyclopedia, histories, and biographies. He was self-educated. He loved learning. He just didn't see it as of much use to a girl. He paradoxically instilled in me a tremendous love and respect for learning. When I got my first faculty position at the University of Chicago, my parents were marvelously proud of me.

I didn't know enough of the culture of science to realize that mentorship was important. That may be more likely to happen to women, but it's not just a gender issue, it's also an issue of whether you came from a background that was academic. I counsel students and postdocs now to be sure that they have mentors. Not having a strong mentoring relationship as a

graduate student may have been best thing that happened to me. I had to find my own thesis project. I didn't realize at the time that it was a surprising thing to do. In retrospect, doing that and succeeding gave me a level of confidence and entrepreneurial spirit that I might not have felt otherwise.

I have been here a year and a half. I have two teenage daughters, and moving the household here was not trivial. I was not looking forward to coming back to Boston because I lived in extreme poverty in graduate school at Harvard. It was a fabulous surprise to see what a wonderful town it is, especially if you have a little

money to enjoy it. I've never experienced a place as stimulating and vibrant and collegial as M.I.T. I love the place.

I have had a wonderful hobby, dancing the Argentine tango, which I truly love. Since I've hurt my back, I haven't been able to do much dancing. My goal is to get back into good enough shape to do some dancing. I also do a tremendous amount of reading. I'm a ravenous reader. I usually have three or four different books going at a time, mostly novels. And I like films a lot. We sometimes catch a movie on the weekends.

A lot of people ask: do I have to give up family for a career? I honestly think if you do it right, a family can en-

hance your career. I was extraordinarily fortunate to meet just the right man, a wonderful husband, friend, and father. In my younger years as an assistant and associate professor, I had to work really hard, but I had a flexible schedule. Now, as a director, it's less flexible. I think scientists are a wonderful group of people. The colleagues I treasure the most are the ones who are very generous and who are so excited about their work that they want to share it. You need to be very excited about the science that you're doing or you won't do a good job.

As told to Lynne Lederman, Ph.D., a medical writer based in Wellesley, MA.

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