



Finding a Niche

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Ever since I can remember, I just loved science. My career and life have taken a lot of fun, interesting turns. I had fabulous professors at Brooklyn College, where I started out as a biology major with an interest in botany. I went to graduate school at the Cornell University Graduate School of Medical Sciences. A faculty member took me to the burn center, which was part of the surgery department, and I fell in love with it. It resonated with me partly because I had been scalded as a child. So I spent the better part of my career in skin research.

There were a couple of places where I made decisions that people thought were a bit odd. The first was being a basic scientist and developing my career within the surgery department, which is as clinical as you can get. People thought I wouldn't get tenure. However, I was the first Ph.D. to get tenure in the department. I just knew what was right for me and I was going to do it. The other thing was that I was pregnant with my first child at my graduation from graduate school. So, I did encounter, although not from my department, some gender-based stereotypes—people thinking I would never be successful because I decided to have children early. Within six months of getting my first faculty position, I got my first grant, and I've never been without funding. It was an interesting time because I was juggling child care. My husband is also a scientist. Trying to figure out how to make it work at a time when it was much less acceptable was a challenge.

I worked my way up the ranks at Cornell Medical School. I took on the associate deanship of the graduate school, and then became the research dean, and the executive director for the Tri-Institutional Research Program, which broadened my horizons because I got to work with people from The Rockefeller University, Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, and Cornell University in Ithaca. I became vice provost for medical affairs. One of my jobs was to link Cornell's main campus in Ithaca with the medical school that is 250 miles away. I spent a week each month in Ithaca and fell in love with the undergraduate environment.

When the deanship came up in the College of Human Ecology at Cornell, it was something I had never thought about. I got the position and found I liked being in an undergraduate setting. I was there for three years, and then

I was nominated for this position at Temple. I had spent all but one year of my career at Cornell. Temple is an urban university that has a very different mission. I grew up in a working-class neighborhood and commuted to Brooklyn College. Temple University was like coming home. I still do research. I became interested in alcohol prevention and alcohol misuse on college campuses. Our joint research team made up of Temple and Cornell Universities is looking at how we can improve alcohol prevention education programs among college students.

The mentor with the most impact on my life was my lab head as a graduate student, Zbigniew Darzynkiewicz. He is incredibly creative, enthusiastic, passionate, and absolutely curious about everything. He instilled in me the passion and enjoyment of asking questions and getting unexpected answers. He passed on to me that you have to love what you are doing, and when things take unexpected turns, you never give up. His tenacity has been an inspiration. Another mentor who has helped me incredibly was Marc Weksler, my other thesis advisor. Marc was a different kind of person, very measured, very steady. One thing I absolutely loved about Marc was that he was a superb writer. He taught me the simplicity of writing and clearness of thought. My writing skills have truly been one of the main skills that have gotten me my grants and enabled me to keep going forward in my career.

The third mentor in my life was G. Tom Shires, my chairman in the department of surgery. When people thought I was out of my mind as a woman and a Ph.D. going into that department, he was always there to meet with me and give me great guidance. I had my second baby while working in his department. He would send residents and medical students to talk to me about how I balanced life and work. Work-life balance is critical to your mental and physical health. I knit, I do needlepoint, Pilates, and yoga. I compete in ballroom dancing, a really cool outlet. I like doing lifts and flips. When you are doing that, it is all you can think about, so it is totally freeing.

Everybody has to find their niche. To me, the most important thing is that you proactively decide your niche as opposed to wandering downstream until you're in a place where you don't have options. Be aware of that and be proud of whatever you're doing. Don't let the whole system take you over to the point where you are forced into a niche because you have never thought about what you love.

-As told to **Lynne Lederman, Ph.D.**, a freelance medical writer based in Mamaroneck, NY.