

From Where I Sit Celebrating Public Service

By Susan M. Fitzpatrick



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Shortly after the 9/11 attacks on the United States, I wrote an essay that appeared in *The Scientist* (1),

"... I left the Washington area in a rental car. Driving across the eastern half of the United States, I listened to a cornucopia of local radio programs. Callers everywhere asked the same question: "What can I do?" Short-term, the answers dealt with the obvious needs: donate, give blood, volunteer. But there is a long-term component of this question that asks how each of us will live in a world we see as fundamentally altered by the Sept. 11 tragedies. Many of us are carefully evaluating what is important to us and whether we are living consistently with our values. As we consider when we will travel again, and for what reasons, many of us in the academic world have been asking ourselves, just how important is what I do? In partial answer to my colleagues asking this question I offer that there has rarely been a greater time for scientists to rededicate themselves to those ideals that first led them to become scientists. We need scientists committed to the search for knowledge and the responsible application of knowledge in the service of humankind. This tragedy has made us aware of how much we do not know, and need to know, about communication technology, about how to handle biological threats, about the complex psychology of human behavior. There is so much we can do and so much we can contribute. We need to feed the hungry, educate the poor, and heal the sick. We need to find new, effective ways of eliminating the conditions that seed social and political instability--poverty, hopelessness, ignorance, and despair. We need new materials and engineering approaches that provide security against disasters, natural and manmade. Think of what could be accomplished if, with a renewed sense of public service, our national security agencies, international relief efforts, and our diplomatic corps could harness the creative energy ..."

Thankfully there are truly terrific individuals who readily accept the challenges I described. This issue of the AWIS magazine highlights careers in public service and takes a look at some of

the scientists, engineers, and technology workers putting their training and skills to work in the public sector. Work in federal, state, or even local government agencies provides a rich array of challenging positions that offer opportunities to use science and technology skills in ways that yield measurable accomplishments and tangible outcomes. Decisions and their ramifications can often take place on a time scale that would make even fast paced academic life-scientists blanch. It is also tempting to propose that women working in the public sector might experience greater career satisfaction as a result of work environments with more transparency as compared with the private sector with respect to salary, benefits, and requirements for career advancement. This is a question worth exploring in depth.

One goal of my AWIS presidency is to continue to enhance the participation of women from all STEM disciplines and work sectors. I hope more women of science working in public service will be active members of AWIS. If you are in public service I encourage you to go online and tell us why you selected your career path and share with us both your success stories and your career frustrations. My view is that there really is strength in numbers and strength in diversity. Introduce your colleagues to AWIS and ask them, if they are not already members, to join. The AWIS website, webinars, and networking opportunities are a great way for us all to share and to learn strategies that can contribute to success. ■

Reference

1. Fitzpatrick, S.M. (Oct. 15, 2001) Science is Service. Opinion piece. *The Scientist*, 43.