

From Where I Sit

By Susan M. Fitzpatrick

In 1923 a young woman named Susan Gill left her home in Ireland for New York City. Like many of the “greenhorn” girls making a similar transition to the new country from the old, she first found work as a housekeeper, and eventually transitioned to a position working the night shift at the Tetley tea bag factory. Her husband worked the day shift for Borden’s milk. Together they lived a full life, actively engaged with family, friends, and community and raised three children who became happy, successful adults with families of their own.

In 1984 another young woman also named Susan stood on stage at New York’s Carnegie Hall and received a diploma granting her the title of Doctor of Philosophy from the President of Cornell University. As you have probably guessed, I am this Susan. Susan Gill was my grandmother and my eyes still well with tears when I remember how proud she was that day. What I was able to accomplish educationally was almost inconceivable to her, yet she was one of my biggest boosters and a constant source of strength. Susan Gill was smart, courageous, resilient, and optimistic. She was always more likely to look forward rather than back. She would have made an excellent scientist and been a terrific colleague. She passed away in December of 1985. I still miss her.

Although I am hoping this Presidential column will touch all AWIS members, I am aiming it at the women who have reached senior, influential positions because along with our success comes responsibility. (Note: younger readers pass this issue on to a senior colleague, mentor, or friend who is not an AWIS member.) Many of us of “a certain age,” have a remembrance of someone encouraging us to pursue our dreams of advanced education in science. Those of you in your early career may be lucky enough to have these all-important individuals still active in your lives. If so, and you have not ever expressed your gratitude I encourage you to do it before the opportunity is lost. I reflect often on my story because it serves as a tangible marker of the social progress we have seen over the past century. Very few women born in 1907, especially women without family wealth, considered attending university, never mind pursuing a career in science, or engineering, or math. And those few who did pursue their dreams often found limited opportunities. It is sobering to think how many fabulous minds were lost to science. Today, most women with a desire to train in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine) related disciplines do not typically encounter too many, if any, obstacles at entry. There no longer exists blatant discrimination barring participation. The challenges women encounter today



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are distributed across the career lifespan and rooted in how our society generally values the contributions of women. There are also, and here I realize I am being somewhat provocative, the challenges women create for themselves, primarily because women too are immersed in society and cannot escape its influences.

One example of how AWIS is tackling some of the societal and institutional challenges faced by women is its efforts to work closely with professional societies to address issues about how the contributions of women are valued and recognized. I encourage you to learn more about the AWARDS project at <http://www.awis.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=383>). I hope more AWIS members will routinely visit the AWIS website – it puts a lot of valuable information about the broad diversity of AWIS activities right at your finger tips.

I began this column with a story about my grandmother not just as an exercise in sentimental nostalgia, but because the telling and the retelling of such stories helps us remember and appreciate that very few of us have to go – or have gone it – alone. In many aspects of life, “we” is preferable to “me.” And that thought brings me back to AWIS. It also brings me back to a belief that success should be accompanied by responsibility. Among the many valuable lessons I learned from my Ph.D. mentor is the idea that we all have a responsibility to “pay it forward” – we thank our mentors by mentoring, assisting, and encouraging those who follow in our footsteps.

Women need boosters throughout every stage of our careers, not just in the early “start-up” phases. Women benefit throughout the entire career life-span from the support, advice, and friendship of individuals who believe in our abilities and have the ability to help us navigate the tides of our careers. We need mentors and colleagues we can turn to for advice, for strategies, for a laugh. Women in the early stages of their careers know how much they need AWIS because they are often counseled by their advisors to join. I suspect that women who let their AWIS mem-

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bership lapse as they obtain higher and higher levels of success do so because they are unaware of the many ways AWIS can continue to contribute to their professional growth and development (never mind mental health!). From where I sit, however, I know that women in their mid-careers and at the tops of their chosen professions run the risk of burn-out. As women take on more and more responsibilities and experience new leadership demands, AWIS serves a rich resource of women who are, or have been, there and have a treasure trove of experience and strategies to share. With AWIS, women do not have to feel alone. For those times when new demands may make you feel that you are up on the high wire, AWIS is standing ready with the net.

One of the goals for my AWIS presidency is creating new and exciting opportunities for women who have achieved success to both benefit from and contribute to AWIS. I know that I benefit greatly from having a wide variety of role models demonstrating that there are lots of ways one can achieve success. True success, in my view, is a combination of contributing to your chosen profession to the fullest of your capabilities and interests, having the opportunity to participate in the extra-professional activities you find meaningful, and being able to offer a hand up to others. While, each of us individually defines what success means, no one has to strive to achieve success alone.

In the January 2012 Washington Wire I mentioned that I would gradually be sharing with you my hopes for AWIS in the coming years. Here's one: I want all women in STEMM to recognize that a membership in AWIS is an investment in success. No professional woman in STEMM should be without it. For 40 years AWIS has been a path-maker demonstrating the importance of mentoring, advocacy, and networking. These tools will become of ever increasing importance in the coming decades.

Another "dream" of mine is that AWIS members – YOU! – will actively engage with AWIS and inform us what you think about when you interact with the AWIS Magazine, the AWIS website, the Washington Wire, and AWIS in Action. Drop us a line, join a discussion group – I and the other members of your governing board want to hear from you. My personal email address is susan@jsmf.org. After this initial column I plan to use the presidential column as a space to write about topics and issues with a bit more of an edge. I will risk going out on a limb in the hopes that you'll take a few minutes to let us know what you are thinking! I'll sign off with a final challenge. The next time a friend or colleague asks why they should join AWIS, ask them why they would not. ■



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Allison Beal, Ph.D., is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP). Dr. Beal received her Ph.D. in Immunology from Thomas Jefferson University in 2008. During her tenure as a graduate student, she served as both the Vice President of Career Development and Vice President of Academic Affairs for the Graduate Student Association at the university. Dr. Beal has been an active AWIS member since 2004, and is the current Graduate Student/Postdoc Liaison for AWIS-PHL chapter. In preparing for the next stage of her career, Dr. Beal has been conducting several informational interviews over the past few months.



Cathy Kessel was educated as a mathematician and has taught mathematics in various U.S. institutions of higher education, from Mills College to Ohio State University. During the 1990s, she made the shift from being a mathematician to being a researcher in mathematics education, auditing courses, and working on research projects at the School of Education at the University of California at Berkeley. She now works as a consultant in mathematics education. She is a past president of the Association for Women in Mathematics and blogs (slowly) at <http://mathedck.wordpress.com>