

Strategies for Life's Twists and Turns

by Susan M. Fitzpatrick

I suppose more than a few AWIS members spent, as I did, a number of afternoons this past spring at graduations and other celebrations such as weddings, christenings, and farewell gatherings marking important life transitions. These joyful events provide wonderful opportunities to talk with young women about their lives and career plans. Not surprisingly, their plans are ambitious and optimistic. Most of the young women I've met are confident that rewarding and challenging careers will mesh with their desires for balanced, fulfilling domestic lives. Their enthusiasm is so infectious; it is hard not to share completely in their optimism.

Without a doubt, the options for women choosing graduate education and careers in science, technology, and engineering (STE) are more varied than even a generation ago. Still, women report finding it difficult to meet the demands of STE careers without sacrificing their dreams for a rich personal life. When I talk to women just a few years senior to new graduates, it's not unusual to find their enthusiasm, optimism, and confidence somewhat tempered. Some degree of tempering, in and of itself, is not necessarily a bad thing as youthful dreams are unencumbered by changing priorities. The newly minted Ph.D. who dreams of living the remainder of her life in Paris may find that a two-year postdoctoral fellowship in the City of Light provides plenty of *joie de vivre* but that the pull "home" is stronger than anticipated. Sometimes the tempering results from an inability to "see" how their dreams could possibly come to fruition. How do you launch a career and start a family simultaneously? How do you identify the career paths in STE best suited to your strengths and interests over the long-term? How is it possible to reenter the STE workforce after a hiatus? How do you reconcile the sometimes competing demands of dual-career couples? Women isolated in departments, institutions, or businesses with limited opportunities for contact with other women may not realize they can call on a variety of strategies to help smooth the way. Learning from other women's experiences is an invaluable benefit of AWIS membership. If you have friends and colleagues who are not yet a part of the AWIS network, see the last page of this issue and urge them to join today!

In this column, I share some of the strategies AWIS member Dr. Suzanne Fisher, Director of Receipt and Referral, Center for Scientific Review, NIH, used to successfully negotiate some of life's twists and turns. In 1978, Suzanne arrived on the NIH campus a postdoctoral fellow fresh from completing graduate training at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. Choosing the Washington, DC, area as the place to launch her postgraduate career was a very deliberate decision. Suzanne and her husband, Marshall Fisher, a mathematician and computer scientist, had carefully considered where they might both pursue challenging work in the same geographic location. The Washington, DC, area offered myriad employment options in academia, government, and the private sector as well as a location known for a wonderfully rich quality of life.

What Suzanne probably did not foresee, as she began her work in the Laboratory of Pathology at the National Cancer Institute (NCI) in 1978, was that she would spend the next quarter of a century, and her entire professional career to date, at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Nor could she have easily predicted how remarkably diverse her career there would be.

Suzanne and Marshall met on the first day of Michigan State's student orientation activities and married shortly after graduation four years later. As students at Michigan State's Lyman Briggs College, a residential college for science and math majors just in its second year, Suzanne and Marshall felt especially nurtured by the special atmosphere of Briggs and by having a smaller "home" within a large university. They pursued their graduate education at the University of Illinois. Over the course of their 30-year marriage, they have always lived together, so their careful choice of Washington, DC, as their postgraduate destination was a wise one. Suzanne and Marshall are the proud parents of James, a recent Bowdoin College graduate, now a student at Northwestern's Medill School of journalism. Suzanne was quick to point out that pursuing a deliberate strategy about where to live need not be limiting -- but it does require some serious thinking and planning about what is truly important.

From my own interactions with young, dual career couples I find that few are as prescient as Suzanne and Marshall were. Young couples often underestimate how complicated a commuter relationship can be --particularly for those who are also pursuing a time-demanding career. I am not advocating that dual-career couples consider living only in New York, Boston, or another large city. But dual-career couples can benefit from carefully evaluating locations with an eye to the variety of career options available. It is worthwhile considering not only the directions each person is currently pursuing but also opportunities the area offers over the long term.

After her 2-year postdoctoral experience at NCI, Suzanne signed on as a staff fellow (akin to a second postdoctoral position) at the National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD) basic science laboratory. Suzanne's research at the NCI laboratory focused on clinical research, so the move gave her a chance to experience a different institute's culture and build her skills in basic science research. During her 2 years at NICHD a number of factors, both intellectual and practical, led Suzanne to consider exploring another side of NIH its extramural programs. Suzanne became intrigued with "the other side of science," particularly the hows and whys of policy and programmatic decisions. She admits the intriguing challenge of extramural work was not the only factor that guided her decision. Her research project was not progressing well, at least partly because the overall laboratory objectives had changed; she had also developed increasingly severe allergic reactions to laboratory animals.

Suzanne applied the same pragmatic approach to investigating a career change she used when she chose a place to live. First, she committed to completing her two-year fellowship, which gave her time to complete some planned research while she carefully investigated the extramural structure of NIH. Second, Suzanne applied her research skills to learning what she could about the extramural side of NIH. Suzanne talked her way into the "extramural fundamentals" course offered to new NIH extramural staff and took the time to figure out the many layers of positions it takes to run a huge organization like NIH. Suzanne put the NIH directory to work and contacted staff members, most of who were happy to talk to her about their work or to refer her to other contacts. Attracted to the Scientific Review Administrator (SRA) positions, Suzanne started with a trial position that evolved into a permanent, full-time position with the NCI. An opportunity to move to the National Eye Institute (NEI) a much smaller institute than NCI -- which had only one SRA at that time -- brought Suzanne into contact with Catherine Henley, an experienced, creative, and original science administrator who taught Suzanne a great deal.

In 1989, Suzanne was offered an opportunity to move to the Receipt and Referral Branch. Because Receipt and Referral is where all NIH proposals are initially processed (more than 50,000 this year!), she sees the "big picture" of NIH beyond the scope possible while working for any one institute. Over the past decade she has acquired increasingly more seniority and responsibilities and now serves as Director of the Division within the Center of Scientific Review. Suzanne pointed out that she continues to expand her knowledge and skills because, in addition to their "official" day jobs, NIH staffers have the opportunity to participate in special projects and programs, workshops, and seminar series as well as to serve on the variety of committees needed to keep NIH humming. Clinical research, basic science research, research administration, and high-level management -- few places offer that many career options within a four-mile radius!

Rather than benefiting from the assistance of one long-term mentor, Suzanne graciously acknowledges that she benefited from guidance received from many helpful people who took the time to share their knowledge with her. How does Suzanne feel about having spent most of her adult life at the NIH? She thinks that, within the enormous structure of NIH, institutional experience and knowledge is a real strength. Over the years, Suzanne has built a wide network of contacts and knows what it takes to get something done. Suzanne commented that, all in all, NIH provides a good work environment for women, and younger women benefit from the presence of many senior women, not only in the very top positions but also at the important middle and senior administrative and management levels. The fact that the pay scale is set by federal standards also makes it difficult for men and women performing the same task not to receive similar salaries.

Intrigued about the possibility of working on the extramural side of the premier science funding organization in the world? During our conversation, Suzanne offered some valuable insights about the different rewards and

characteristics of "managing science" vs. bench research that could help you decide how suitable your temperament might be to science management. Science administrative positions can offer the opportunity to focus on the "big picture" rather than concentrating on keeping track of small incremental advances. The broad professional demands require a willingness to continually expand and stretch scientific knowledge. Superior oral and written communication skills are a must for these positions. Extra mural positions offer extensive travel opportunities to site visits, conferences, and workshops, which makes it possible to build and maintain a vast network of colleagues and friends. Handling surprises, juggling multiple demands, and solving logistical problems are also key elements for success. Suzanne finds that she calls on many of the skills she possesses that initially drew her to biology, including observation, synthesis, and attention to fine details. It is important to realize that managers do not have the same sense of ownership of a "product" as do researchers pursuing independent research projects.

Talking with Suzanne gave me a good sense of the energy, vibrancy, and diversity of challenges available within one multifaceted, complex organization. NIH extramural positions allow scientists to tap into the programmatic, logistical, administrative, and policy side of science while staying current with the latest progress at the bench. Another advantage, experience with the inner workings of NIH, will serve you well --regardless of what path you ultimately decide to tread!