Sharing Knowledge Makes Us All Stronger
Conversations with the AWIS Executive Board

If you’ve written for a quarterly publication you’ll know that the timing of issue due-dates mirrors the anticipatory timing with which seasonal clothing appears in department stores. As I begin to write this column, it is over 100 degrees Fahrenheit in Missouri and shops are trying to entice the few of us actually moving around to purchase cashmere and tweed! Contributions to the Fall issue of AWIS Magazine are usually submitted during the dog days of August — a time of the year when my brain loses much of its ability to function until the cooler air of autumn revives it. As I wondered what in the world to write about, a colleague serendipitously provided the much-needed spark of inspiration! A question about the different women serving on the AWIS national board was all I needed to seed this column — a quick look at the roads each of these truly wonderful (as you will see) women is traveling.

It doesn’t take more than a quick glance at their biosketches and curriculum vitae, to see that the AWIS membership wisely elected board members who are smart, remarkably versatile in their accomplishments, and solidly committed to advancing opportunities for anyone wishing to pursue a career in science and technology (see bios at http://www.awis.org/network/board.html). The executive board is composed of women with expertise in physics, biology, and mathematics working in many diverse aspects of engineering, biotechnology, academic administration, government, and non-profit sectors.

Although impressive, their two-dimensional listings of educational and career achievements do not portray the richness of their personal experiences, life choices, and stories, both humorous and poignant. The standard biosketch omits the wit, wisdom, and wry irony with which most of us face life’s frustrations. Sadly, in this one column I am also limited to providing a smidgen of the wide ranging topics covered during our conversations — and so, what I offer here are mere “splinters from the board” (see sidebar on facing page).

Hopefully, the tidbits provided in this column will encourage AWIS members to seek opportunities to get to know their executive board better. One way is by inviting AWIS officers to participate in special chapter activities and special sessions at scientific/professional events. I hope all AWIS members able to do so will come by and visit with the board during the AWIS reception at the annual AAAS meeting (see http://www.aas.org/meetings/).

Jill Sideman, Linda Mantel, Betty Ivey, Sue Rosser, Donna Dean, and Judith Weis had completed college prior to the landscape changes following 1970s affirmative action legislation.* I anticipated their early professional experiences would contrast sharply with those of Susan Cantor, Sharon Wampler, and Melanie Leitner whose scientific training occurred in the 1980s and 90s. Surprisingly, the differences were less striking than the similarities. In fact, despite the diversity of experience, career paths, and life choices, the nine women have much in common. Puzzling over this, I realized that a strong self-selection factor characterizes the kind of person who, despite numerous obligations, is willing to serve on a volunteer board. These are women who step up to the plate when something needs to be done. They believe it is by taking action that we make things better. They are optimistic and realistic — they are not easily discouraged but neither do they put a happy face on everything.

In my notes, jotted under “common things” are listed: entrepreneurial, resilient, optimistic about potential, passionate about their work, and deliberate in seeking opportunities for personal and professional growth. These women possess a strong sense of self — a deep awareness of what it is they enjoy and do well and — even more important — an awareness of those things at which they are less adept or less willing to pursue, regardless of their ability. And, lest you think they, as a group, are more optimistic about their futures because they have been luckier in life than many of us — believe me, they have dealt with a fair share of challenges and adversity! Among the nine women’s histories, there are incidences of harassment, the experience of being scientifically scooped, the pain of making risky decisions that failed, and perseverance despite active professional discouragement from colleagues. It occurred to me while we talked that, if it is possible to identify elements common to success, one is surely confidence in your own abilities while another is the ability to learn quickly from your experiences and move on. During our conversations, the impact of having the encouragement of parents and teachers who believed in you came up repeatedly. Somehow we have to help more


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girls and young women experience such positive support.

Another refreshing shared characteristic is a willingness to acknowledge serendipity. Donna Dean’s farm childhood came in handy when an unexpected phone call resulted in her accepting an FDA position. Her ability to tell the “north end from the south end” of a cow brought a needed pragmatic perspective to a regulatory unit that evaluated drugs proposed for use in food-producing animals. The other staff in the unit had all come from urban environments. Jill Sideman’s career blossomed in a completely new area after her frustrating experience in fundamental physics. Jill created a new business based on environmental science (a field that did not actually exist at the time!) in response to her experiences with activists challenging a power company’s plans to run new power lines through her town. Linda Mantel encountered a rewarding professional segue because a colleague suggested she journey to Santa Domingo to teach a course. She seized the chance even though the class would be in Spanish, a language she did not speak fluently.

In general, the women serving on the executive board do not see a rewarding science career requiring that you pick a narrow row and then hoe it for all its worth! They share an interest in pursuing work that requires integration and not only across subject matter disciplines. There seems to also be a willingness to explore at the interfaces of science, politics, administration, and the forces shaping society.

Despite the recognition that opportunities for women are increasing, the strain of juggling work and family demands appears to be an issue immune to generational change. In fact, five of the nine executive board members have not had children, although Susan Ganter, Sharon Wampler, and Melanie Leitner do hope to start families. None of the three is quite sure how she will handle childcare, but their colleagues offer possible strategies to consider.

Judith Weis, who has pursued what many might consider a more “traditional” academic career, expresses a view that universities were much more amenable to flexible scheduling in an age when productivity was measured by the quality of publications rather than the quantity of grant dollars. Judith raised her children while actively pursuing lab work. Judith was fortunate in marrying a proto-feminist (it was the 1960s!). Her spouse, also an academic, willingly shouldered his share of household responsibility. Judith laughingly credits luck, rather than foresight, with providing her with an enlightened husband, but a message for younger women is to explicitly determine what level of shared responsibility you can expect from a potential partner.

Betty Ivey pursued a route that could be a viable option for professionals if our rush-rush society stopped putting career advancement and starting a family on parallel, rather than serial, tracks. Raising her family during a hiatus between her masters and doctoral degrees, Betty kept her feet firmly in academia by teaching college physics part-time for seventeen years. When ready to re-enter her profession full-time, Betty completed her doctoral degree. A “fresh” PhD and up-to-date research skills coupled with years of academic experience put Betty right on track for advancement. It is unfortunate that so few institutions are willing to formalize part-time or flex-time positions and career re-entry opportunities.

A single mother of young children, Sue Rosser found the environment at a small liberal arts college more supportive than that of a research university. By being resourceful, however, she enjoyed the best of both worlds, building a strong publication record through summer research at the University of Wisconsin while her children spent quality time with their grandparents. When she was ready to move to a more research-intensive university her academic productivity made the shift possible.

The “two-body problem” is another work/life issue the executive officers have faced with forethought, resourcefulness, and resilience. One good piece of advice is to concentrate on geographic locations offering diverse opportunities. Donna Dean has continually advanced her career with rewarding and challenging positions all located within the boundaries of metro Washington, DC.** New York City, Boston, San Francisco, San Diego, Seattle, and Chicago are also cities that offer a plethora of career tracks because they are rich in educational, cultural, non-profit, and private-sector positions. If community stability is important to you, choosing an area that offers long-range flexibility is doubly important as it is not possible to predict where your interests will lead you ten years down the road!

Talking one on one with the executive board is both a heart-warming and a heart-rending experience. They, like the AWIS members they represent, are so talented, so thoughtful, so committed, with so much to contribute it seems ridiculous to contemplate the hurdles science and society require they clear in pursuit of their life’s work. What could be more obvious than recognizing how impoverished science would be without them (and you)?

**For another example see http://www.jsmf.org/about/s/smf-awis-summer2002.htm

The Road Taken Editor Susan Fitzpatrick can be contacted at susan@jsmf.org.