



Survive Adversity by Playing to Your Strengths

We all anticipate the usual twists, turns, and bumps in the road of life, but we are rarely prepared for the occurrence of adverse, life-altering events. In this column, I am profiling two women, Sara Kenkare and Denise McCartney, who generously share their stories with AWIS, hoping that their experiences will help others.

Sara Kenkare's scientific resume reads like a dream-sheet: doctoral degree and post-graduate training in pharmacology at the research-powerhouse University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), followed by increasing responsibility and advancement at one of biotechnology's shining stars, Genentech.

Closer examination, however, reveals something unusual in the professional history of a scientist as successful as Sara — a two-and-a-half-year gap. From early 1996 to late 1998, the years between her postdoctoral experience at UCSF and joining the staff of Genentech, Sara fell off the face of the scientific earth. During those years, Sara learned a number of valuable lessons about herself when she became the mother of a beautiful daughter, Ria, a special-needs child.

Sara was a young, gung-ho postdoctoral fellow when she and her husband, also a scientist, started their family. Her pregnancy was uneventful, and although there were moments of concern during the cesarean delivery, Ria seemed by all measures a healthy child.

When Ria was a few months of age, her parents worried that something was not quite right, but were willing to believe what others told them — their anxiety was normal for first-time parents. Then, during Ria's four-month checkup, her pediatrician noted that she was missing some developmental milestones and ordered additional tests "just to be on the safe side."

Sara describes those early days of testing and waiting as one of the hardest times of her life. She decided not to say anything to her colleagues at UCSF about what was happening with Ria. With the clarity of hindsight, Sara now knows that she added the stress of worrying about how her colleagues viewed her time away from the lab to her anxiety for Ria. She tried to keep up at work, often bringing home work, but she knew her productivity was low by UCSF's high standards. Today, she acknowledges that more openness with her lab might have been a better strategy.

Sara also admits that being a scientist made her situation both better and worse. She spent a lot of time reading the literature

(which helped), and focused enormous energy on trying to figure out "why" in place of "what now."

By six months, Ria showed more obvious signs of developmental delay. Sara suffered from depression, exacerbated by a feeling that the scientific world she loved, defined by clearly articulated theories and controlled experiments, no longer made sense to her. Most of the tests Ria underwent seemed designed to eliminate rather than identify what might be wrong. To this day, Ria does not have a definitive diagnosis explaining the causes of her developmental delays.

Finally, Sara opened up to her postdoctoral mentors, who (physicians by training),



Sara Kenkare and Ria

Luckily, Genentech is focused primarily on the bottom line, concerned more about science and meeting deadlines than about watching the clock. The flexibility of this environment allowed Sara to thrive scientifically.

offered support and assistance. Sara was somewhat surprised by their “do what you have to do, kids come first” response but gratefully accepted their understanding.

Eventually, Sara acknowledged that she could no longer manage to hold down her post doc and keep up with the demands of Ria’s care and therapy schedule. Again, her advisors offered support — even suggesting small ways she could stay connected with the lab, such as co-authoring review articles. Sara appreciated their offers but knew in her heart she would not have the time or energy for science.

She recognized that focusing full time on Ria was what was most important to her. Sara and her husband decided that, despite his own overwhelming worries for Ria, he would be the one to remain focused on his job, because his position was more senior and secure. The decision to resign her post-doctoral fellowship brought with it concerns about how Sara would ever resume her scientific career — the academic dogma being that, once you stop, you can never catch up.

The passing of a few years gave Sara time to come to grips with Ria’s disabilities and to settle into a routine. Her husband, parents, and in-laws provided a true support system for her. As the time approached for Ria to begin pre-school Sara began to think about restarting her career.

Remarkably, a senior scientist familiar with Sara’s research called her at home to talk about a position he had available. Sara laughingly describes blowing the dust off some of her slides. “Slides” she exclaims, “When everyone by now was using Power Point!”

Sara went to the interview confident, even though she was not completely sure she was ready to relinquish her role as full-time mother. Giving presentations was one of her favorite scientific activities so knew she was playing to her strengths. When Genentech offered her the position, Sara and her husband decided she would try it for six months. Ria would attend school and

have a full-time nanny. Sara would continue to accompany Ria to therapy.

Reluctant to share too much of her family’s story, Sara decided she would tell only her supervisor that her daughter’s care required flexible hours. Luckily, Genentech is focused primarily on the bottom line, concerned more about science and meeting deadlines than about watching the clock. The flexibility of this environment allowed Sara to thrive scientifically.

Sara, currently an associate director, has now been with Genentech almost 5 years, steadily advancing along the career ladder. Ria is steadily progressing too. She was recently accepted into the Bridge School, a leading educator of special-needs children.

Over the years, Sara’s relationship with her supervisor, who first recruited her to Genentech, has become more open and more trusting. He knows more about Ria’s issues today and has been extremely helpful, as has been the human resources office of Genentech. Her supervisor has told Sara that if she had been more open earlier he could have done more.

Sara knows that some of her early reluctance to talk about Ria was due to the vague discomfort many women in science feel about introducing their family life into

the workplace. Today, Sara believes the climate for women is changing, particularly in industry, where the bottom line is more directly measurable and less abstract than in academia. She understands the sensitivity women feel of not wanting to be treated “differently,” of appearing to be getting special treatment, but she has gained the confidence to let her work, and the work of her laboratory, speak for itself. Still, even though her supervisors are aware of Ria’s needs, Sara is still less willing to share the details of her personal life with her peers.

When I first met Sara, I was struck by how eloquently she describes how her experiences with Ria made her a better scientist. She thinks more seriously about what she is doing and the difference biomedical research can make in people’s lives. Her laboratory keeps its eyes on the goals of the research. Her sharp focus is not purely for time management but to remind everyone why they are there.

Sara truly enjoys work and doesn’t mind integrating it into her life. She is happy to work on her laptop while sitting on the sofa in the evening. She has very little “down time;” she doesn’t schmooze around the coffeepot with colleagues. But, she laughingly admits, this has less to do with Ria than with her own personality. At the end of the day, if she can say she’s a good mom and a good scientist whose work could help someone, then she is living her life to its fullest.

Sara’s strategy of minimizing who is and who is not aware of the concerns she juggles each day is not an option available to Denise McCartney, Associate Vice Chancellor for Research Administration at Washington University in St. Louis. Paralyzed in her twenties when she fell from a roof, Denise accepts that she is known around campus as the “woman in the wheelchair” before people get to know her as Denise. She cannot avoid dealing with how others react to her disability.

While the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act has made work and leisure activities available for the millions of individuals living with a disability (http://www.uiowa.edu/~lhpdc/work/1_number.html), many are still hesitant when they first meet someone unable to walk. When I asked Denise if working at a University with one



Denise McCartney

Continued on the next page

of the top academic medical centers meant people were more knowledgeable about spinal cord injury she laughingly shook her head. It seems that unless your colleagues have direct experience with individuals using a wheelchair they often respond with the same social awkwardness as people in non-medical settings. Denise says she helps by taking the lead, putting people at their ease by being very open about how they can help or not help.

Denise very frankly admits that she has a triple whammy — she uses a wheelchair, she has come to her senior position through the administrative rather than the academic ranks, and she is a woman in what is still, at the upper levels, a man's world. But much like Sara, she succeeds by playing to her strengths.

Denise stated that it usually doesn't take long for her professionalism to move her interactions with colleagues onto a different tack. I experienced this transition first hand. Within minutes of meeting Denise, I was less interested in talking to her about coping with spinal cord injury (the initial reason for the interview) and more interested in learning about the responsibilities and challenges of her position. The Associate Vice Chancellor for Research Administration is a new title at Washington University, meaning Denise has the rare and wonderful opportunity to create her position. Essentially, her office's mission is to enhance the research enterprise of the university — making sure the faculty has the services and infrastructure they need to achieve their research goals. Denise is responsible for research performed on both the main campus and at the medical center, ensuring uniform institutional policies.

The Associate Vice Chancellor is the official institutional contact on all grants and contracts. Her involvement begins with proposal submission and continues through the life of the grant. Her office manages compliance with all regulations governing research practices and laboratory management. Denise sees this as an educational role — making sure principal investigators know what is required of them and providing them with the right tools. Denise sees her office as interfacing with the faculty, the institution, and funding agencies — most often, the federal government. Interestingly,

Both women were seriously tested by fate and emerged with a strong sense of self and a confidence in their abilities and knowledge of what it is they do well.

Denise sees this incredibly demanding role as primarily dependent on personal relationships, on the faculty trusting that her number one goal is helping them achieve success.

Denise provided a number of interesting insights on careers in academic administration. Her new position draws on what might appear as disparate skills acquired during a series of lateral moves that perfectly positioned her for her current job. She encourages women be open to the opportunities presented by lateral shifts, particularly if they provide new experiences that could open the door for advancement.

Denise has not had “a mentor” but has benefited from a series of mentors who helped her identify where her talents were likely to be a good fit. She also is open to relationships with peers she calls “partnering” — combining complementary talents with others, if that is what is necessary to get important projects done.

Denise takes an active role mentoring her junior colleagues and, when requested, visits individuals who have recently suffered spinal cord injuries. She is very sensitive to the timing of such visits, knowing from her own experience that each person must find her own road to recovery.

Denise's use of a wheelchair — and she recently made a huge concession to her disability when she traded her manual chair for a power chair to ease and speed her transit time — requires her to communicate openly with others, particularly about travel. She is usually the first on and last off the airplane, adding as much as an hour to her travel time. She has to carefully evaluate hotels, meeting rooms, podiums, and restaurants for accessibility.

Closer to home, construction on the Washington University campus has introduced an ever-changing maze of routes so she cannot schedule meetings too tightly. Listening to her, I realized how much easier many of our lives would be if we were more communicative about our own preferences. I am practically allergic to anxiety and usually arrive at places comfortably early. Rather than hyperventilate the next time someone else arranges my travel, I will make certain

extra transit time is added to the itinerary.

As different as Sara and Denise's challenges are, I was struck by the similar approaches they are taking to balancing their lives. Both women were seriously tested by fate and emerged with a strong sense of self and a confidence in their abilities and knowledge of what it is they do well. If Sara, like me, resented when work intrudes into the “off hours” she would be less able to juggle the multiple time demands of her day. Denise counsels that women interested in administration have to be comfortable with the “when others succeed, I succeed” nature of the work. When all is going well, she rarely hears about it — and Denise sees that as a positive characteristic of her position.

Whether you are dealing with an unexpected life-changing event or just trying to make day-to-day life work there is an important take-home message in Denise's and Sara's stories. Succeeding in your professional life means knowing your strengths and letting them work for you. ♦

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



Courses and Conferences
Bar Harbor, Maine

Current Protocols in
Stem Cell Biology

August 3-8, 2003

This residential workshop will bring together some of the leading experts on ES cell technology. Through comparative approaches, 16 students will be trained in the successful culture, maintenance and manipulation of ES cells. Application deadline June 3, 2002. For more information, please visit www.jax.org/courses.