

## **Diane Wilson-Cox Acceptance Speech**

**Academic Women's Association  
September 25, 2002**

### **Achieving Success as an Academic Woman**

What a great pleasure it is for me to receive the Academic Women's Association 'Woman of the Year' Award. There can be no more satisfying honor than recognition by one's colleagues. I feel particularly happy to receive this reward, as a relative newcomer to the University of Alberta. I came to the University in 1996, to establish a department of Medical Genetics. I became the first Chair of this department, and the first female Chair of the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry, with Dr. Carol Cass appointed at the same time.

First I want to thank my nominators, our department Awards Committee, Drs. Susan Andrew, and Dr. Darrell Tomkins for their time and effort in preparing the nomination. Susan, I might add, is one of those individuals who has discovered that Edmonton can be quite an excellent place to live and in fact may be even rival Vancouver!

I would like to discuss two of the factors that I believe help lead to success: mentors, and teamwork. Will then finish by making some remarks regarding our view of success.

#### **Mentors**

At the present time, approximately 50% of medical students are female, and there are a significant proportion of women enrolled in all faculties, including Engineering, typical male domain, and women occupy positions as department chairs and deans. It may be hard for some of you to imagine the very different environment at the time I was an undergraduate at university. At the University of Western Ontario, I was the only female in the class in the final year of the course in Biology. Interestingly, there was not a great expectation that women would carry on to graduate studies. Although I graduated as Gold Medallist in my class, the possibility of doing graduate studies was unknown to me and had never been mentioned by any of the Faculty. Apparently only the males in the class had been approached about doing graduate studies. I naively went into the world thinking I would have an exciting career in discovery and research. However, I was disappointed when I discovered the types of jobs that were available for me at that time, having graduated with a B.Sc. in Biology. However, one of my professors, Dr. Helen Battle, took a great interest in the careers of female students and proved to be an outstanding mentor. She had always been noted for her very rigorous approach to courses and exams, and had an astounding knowledge of histology. She learned that I had not yet found that 'exciting job' and did not know what I would do after graduation. She suggested I visit Dr. Norma Ford Walker, the human geneticist at The Hospital for Sick Children Toronto, and a pioneer in human genetics in Canada. Dr. Walker was an individual who had made a very interesting career change. She was trained as an entomologist, and became interested in human genetics. For many years, she provided genetic counseling to those with genetic disorders. Her particular area of research was the study of twins, and twinning mechanisms, and she was particularly noted for her studies of the Dionne quintuplets. She was an excellent teacher and researcher. Most importantly, she had a genuine interest in her students. And so I was very fortunate to have a second mentor who had a major influence on my life. For it was during my time with her that I discovered the fun and excitement of research. My studies on congenital dislocation of the hip involved contacting a large number of former patients, and also gave me an

opportunity to work with orthopedic surgeons, one of whom, Dr. Robert Salter, was particularly innovative in creating new surgical procedures. After completing my M.Sc. degree, I carried out research on copper transport, which was eventually, decades later, to once again be a major focus of my research leading to the discovery of the causative gene in 1993.

Just as I was deciding that perhaps a Ph.D. would be a good idea, my husband was transferred to Montreal, and so I eventually registered for a Ph.D. at McGill. I think young women are much more direct now in their pursuit of goals! It is interesting that in 1967, the year I left Montreal, the Montreal Stock Exchange became the first in North America to admit females. So this gives you some suggestion of the climate of the times for women in responsible positions. Just a year after that, I completed my Ph.D., by then with one child who had been conceived as I started my Ph.D. The second was still under production when I graduated. During my time at McGill, I was privileged to again have two other mentors, Dr. Clarke Fraser and Dr. Charles Scriver, who were always encouraging, and who seemed to believe that I could be a successful graduate student in spite of my occasional practical genetics.

I returned to The Hospital for Sick Children after graduation, and there had a very satisfying career in genetics research. As a young investigator, another outstanding mentor, hepatologist Dr. Andrew Sass-Kortsak helped me to learn the fundamentals of running a laboratory and writing grants. Although my career at that institution was exciting and satisfying, the thought of a challenging leadership position was attractive. So, when I was invited to come to the University of Alberta to consider the challenge of building a new department, I came, with not a particularly serious thought of staying, to look at the possibility. Like many others who have come from a different geographical region, I was skeptical about what Edmonton might offer. However, it indeed is a well kept secret! I arrived on a beautiful sunny morning in December with the sun shining on sparkling snow and fell in love with this city. I particularly love the winters, as anyone does if they enjoy skiing on trails and mountains, with great summer hiking. But I never forget that my mentors have helped make my career possible.

### **Teamwork**

What a challenge it was to begin a new department. First there was the major job of designing 24,000 sq. ft. of space in the Medical Sciences Building, space designed for then unknown occupants. Then there was the task of recruiting faculty to a barely existing department. With the very strong support of Dean Lorne Tyrrell, funds became available for the job. One of the most exciting things about the job has been the recruitment of new faculty to the department. We have been fortunate to be able to recruit the most outstanding young men and women in Canada, all of them AHFMR Scholars, and most also CIHR Scholars. Arriving in a new place where none of the established ways were known, and into a new job, was exciting, demanding, certainly challenging, and sometimes frustrating. I feel very fortunate that an acting chair in the faculty, Dr. Janet Robertson, seemed to know everyone and was often able to guide me through the maze of strange surroundings and activities. During my first five years in the job, nine people were recruited into the department. Interestingly, five of those were women. They were certainly not recruited because they were women, but because they were the best in the country. I believe our department became a model for the recruitment of women among the basic science departments. It is a joy to work with such a talented group of young women and men, and a great privilege to be involved in their career development. Building a new department, or building a research group, depends so much upon teamwork. The building of our department would not have been possible without the contributions and teamwork of all of the faculty members. And so my second factor for success, after good mentorship, is good teamwork.

**Success**

What does it take to be successful as an academic woman? First of all, I think we should not define success too narrowly. Success is of course in part the publication of papers, success as an excellent teacher, and certainly success in being a cooperative member of the team. However, there are other areas of life which we must value in contributing to some 'success'. Friends for support, are very critical for managing all the home and work aspects that we as women are often required to carry out. Success can also be measured in the contribution we make to our friendships, partner, husband or close friends. Success for some of us is keeping a balance between home and work that allows us time for children and personal relationships, as well as occasional time for relaxing and hobbies.

**The Challenge**

As a Professor, I have had the opportunity to work with a wonderful group of students, post-doctoral fellows, and technicians throughout my career. I consider it truly a privilege to constantly have the association of bright young people. I hope that you will find success in your own careers. I challenge you to value your mentors, be good mentors yourselves, and be a team player, supporting others around you and helping in their success.

My thanks again for this very memorable award.