

By Gale Rhodes

The career I dreamed of?

All I knew—given the limited range of professional lives I could observe from my hometown of textile mills and surrounding tobacco fields—was that I wanted to teach. When I took organic chemistry, from one of the dullest teachers I ever had, I knew I wanted to teach that and that I could do it better. When I took biochemistry in graduate school, I knew I wanted to teach that, too. In applying for the very few academic jobs on offer in the early '70s, I sold myself as a biochemist and got a small-college teaching job as one. I gradually became one.

I taught happily for 37 years, including leaves for research and writing, in schools where teaching was emphasized and research was, they said, encouraged and supported—sometimes with no more than pats on the back. I watched some great students emerge from academic backwaters into the open seas of original research, while others went off into careers using science in all sorts of unexpected ways. Some wandered off.

My wife and I moved about to meet the demands of family life. I earned tenure three times. For me, it was a game. Rules of tenure vary from place to place, but I could figure out the rules, didn't mind the work, and ended up feeling that I could wake up in the morning and get tenure on the way to the shower. I complied, sometimes cynically, with the demands of deans and chairs that I produce research or scholarship.

Their prodding helped me produce numerous products I feel good about, including a book that's still in print and still helpful, I am told, after more than 20 years; a website from which many people take maiden flights into protein modeling; and a few dozen odds and ends of publications from my grasshopper mind. In the end, that work made me a better, more enthusiastic, more convincing and longer lasting teacher. So, of course, the deans and chairs were right. These products are satisfying, but they are dim background to all the students.

Everywhere I taught, I was the only biochemist on campus. There are many disadvantages to such isolation, but the great advantage was teaching a full-year course all by myself, instead of taking part in committee-built courses like the one I took in graduate school. Seeing biochemistry whole trumped talking to other biochemists every day. But thank



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goodness for nearby schools and Gordon Research Conferences. Many important elements of my career, I could not have foreseen or dreamed of. I wish the same for you. I mean little things like the desktop computer and the Internet, which were not a gleam in any eye when I set out. Nor could I have imagined operating a molecular blackboard (Nicolas Guex's Swiss-PdbViewer) to lead vivid tours of structural elements and active sites, and then sending students off to explore thousands of biomolecular models on their own laptops. In my search for ways to help students learn, new developments meant new ideas.

I don't know how to advise those of you who see so much, read so much, and shudder about what awaits you. I was very naive about the life upon which I embarked. If, somehow, I had known the effort it would take, I might have been daunted. Inexperience, interest, and engagement protected me. I simply did what seemed to be the next

thing needed and followed my nose toward what interested me most at the time, shaping the work a bit, if needed, to fit external demands. I found my way mostly by watching and listening, taking my own pulse, and using common sense—leaning, as it were, toward a very general goal and a great love, keeping it fuzzy and doing what I could with what came. Specific expectations might have gotten in my way.

In the details, my career was nothing like what I dreamed. I could only have dreamed of evading textiles and tobacco with a life of books and chalk. (I do miss chalk.) Nevertheless, I had the career I dreamed of. ■

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