

By Sandy Becker

Rhubarb pie and science

When I am asked how I became a developmental biologist, I say, “Jim hired me for my rhubarb pie and my Phi Beta Kappa key, and the rest is history.” ■ I did not set out to become a scientist. I majored in history as an undergraduate—at Pomona College in Claremont, California, class of 1963—then bailed on graduate school and became an elementary school teacher in a vain effort to calm a boyfriend’s jealousy. (He feared competition from my graduate school classmates.) A few years later, I married my high school crush and put him through college and medical school by teaching fifth grade. His medical practice under way and our younger child in kindergarten, I began to think about going back to work—but back to what? I was burned out on public school teaching.

My daughter had become friends with the daughter of a professor in the biology department at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, near where we live. Our two families had frequent potluck dinners, and Jim—the biologist—came to be fond of my rhubarb pies. He concluded, I guess, that I knew how to follow a recipe and probably had enough brains to follow one written in metric units, because he offered me a job as a technician in his lab.

When I first started working, I had no training in biology except what I had picked up by reading my husband’s textbooks while he was in college and medical school. If asked, I would probably have answered that a molar solution is something used to rinse your back teeth. In Jim’s lab, I learned to make primary cultures of *Drosophila* embryos, run Northern gels, and extract polytene chromosomes. (This was the 1980s.) It was indeed a lot like baking pies: If you carefully followed the recipe—the protocol—your experiment would likely work, although the data might not tell you what you were hoping to hear. I took my first biology course: genetics. I got a B.

A perk of being a Wesleyan employee is that you get to take courses for free, so I gradually filled the holes in my scientific education. Over the years, I’ve taken 17 biology courses, if you count organic chemistry, and I now have three Wesleyan graduate degrees, two in biology and one in science journalism.

I’ve thought once or twice about getting a Ph.D., but I haven’t done it. I guess I just don’t want my boss’s job. Principal investigators (PIs) slave away, teaching and writing grants, and the data come to them secondhand. For me, the



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fun part is doing the experiments!

When Jim closed his lab, I moved upstairs to another cell biology lab, using mouse cells instead of *Drosophila*. I have stayed in Laura’s lab for more than 20 years, doing embryonic stem cell culture, preparing cells for transplant into mouse brains, and immunostaining. Sometimes my job is to be skeptic-in-chief, and sometimes I’m the head troubleshooter. I read the literature, train students—graduate and undergraduate—and try to make sense of it all.

Being an academic research technician is not a very profitable career—not, at least, at a small private university. In 2005, I left the university to work for a biotechnology company in Massachusetts and

was paid twice as much. That biotech company may cure macular degeneration someday—I hope they do because I got stock options—but what I really want to do is find stuff out. So, after 3 years, I returned to Laura’s lab for another few years of sometimes exasperating but always engrossing basic research.

My name is on many of the papers that have come out of the lab. I’m seldom the first author and never the last, but along with the students, I am always the first to see the data, and when they have something important to say, I’m often the first to recognize it. You might say that Laura and I have a symbiotic relationship: I need a PI to lead and fund the lab, and she needs me to run it. ■

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