

By Rachel Bernstein

All in the family

Renee JiJi and Jason Cooley work together at the University of Missouri (MU), Columbia, and have a daughter at home. The two met in graduate school and got married when they were postdocs living apart—she in Washington, D.C., and he in Philadelphia. JiJi began a tenure-track faculty position in the MU chemistry department in 2005; Cooley followed suit a year and a half later. JiJi and Cooley sat down for a conversation about working with a spouse and their different experiences traveling similar paths. Their comments have been edited for brevity and clarity.

JiJi: Work morphs in and out of the conversations at home. You have an idea while you're drinking coffee in the morning and you have someone to talk to about it, and that's kind of nice. We study protein folding and dynamics, and our work has become very collaborative. We both have very distinct research agendas, but collaboration has worked really well because we have different backgrounds. But sometimes I think our colleagues see us as a unit rather than as two different people, even though we do the work of two people.

Cooley: Certainly during each of our tenure processes, there was criticism that we had not worked independently enough.

JiJi: I went on the job market, just to test the waters, and happened to get an offer. I took the job here with the understanding that they had mechanisms for spousal accommodation and that, hopefully, would materialize into a position for Jason.

Cooley: I still had a year of postdoc funding left. Then I moved to Missouri and they gave me a courtesy appointment, with no money or lab space. Renee graciously shared her office with me. It was only after I got an informal offer from another university that negotiations about a tenure-track job here started in earnest.

I'm the trailing spouse, but my initial salary was based on Renee's salary, plus some small amount because it was inconceivable that I would make less than my wife. It was literally said that way. I said, "Fine, that's more money for us," but maybe I should have said it wasn't appropriate.

My colleagues ask me out for beer every once in a while; that certainly wouldn't happen for Renee.



“[T]here was criticism that we had not worked independently enough.”

JiJi: When I came up for tenure, my tenure extension for the birth of our daughter was held against me. I was expected to have been more productive than my colleagues—not just as productive.

Cooley: It was couched as, she was as productive as the other people, but she had an extra year. I didn't take a tenure extension for having a child. I was told not to.

JiJi: If I had waited until I had tenure to have kids, it never would have happened. After our daughter was born, I had three miscarriages. Every one of them was horrific. The hormonal shifts were huge and somewhat debilitating, and I decided, for the sake of my career, to not continue to try to have another child. I was in the second half of my 30s, and I think I just waited too long. I tell my grad students that they shouldn't postpone having a family for their career because they never know what their future is going to be. ■

Rachel Bernstein is a staff writer for Science Careers. For more on life and careers, visit ScienceCareers.org. Send your story to SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.

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