

Biophysicist in Profile



Felix Goñi

“If I today was told “you cannot go on working in science,” I would go back to the business of fireworks,” says Felix Goñi, Director of the Biophysics Unit of Basque Country University in Bilbao, Spain. In college, Goñi and some friends owned their own fireworks business. While working on a display for the Princess of Monaco, Goñi was injured and quickly decided science was a physically safer option than fireworks. “I am a scientist,” Goñi explains of the career path he chose, “science is my main passion.”

The eldest of eight children in a middle class family, Goñi admits he was spoiled and never lacked for anything.

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His mother, Maria Jesus, ran a menswear shop and his father, Clemente, ran a furniture store. Born on May 12, 1951, he soon discovered that he never had to work hard to get good marks in school. Not particularly interested in athletics, he

ended up spending much more time “reading than playing.”

There were many people who were seminal in moving Goñi toward a career in research. The first was Clemente Goñi’s friend, Joaquin Landa, a chemist. “He spoiled my future as a doctor,” jokes Goñi about the chemistry books Landa lent him while Goñi attended The University of Navarra Medical School in Pamplona. While his first three years at the university consisted mainly of science classes, it was the classic chemistry books that Landa lent Goñi to read during the summers that resulted in Goñi becoming a “star in biochemistry.”

It was his first science professor, Esteban Santiago, his mentor at University of Navarra and a pioneer of biochemistry in Spain, who taught Goñi what science entailed. He shared with Goñi a love for mitochondria and encouraged him to continue studying. While in Medical School Goñi took biophysics summer courses in Portugal at the Gulbenkian Foundation. Through these courses Goñi met Dennis Chapman, a pioneer in lipid bio-

physics, and a professor at the Royal Free Hospital at the University of London, where Goñi eventually did his postdoc. Goñi calls Chapman his “scientific father.” As Goñi’s mentor Chapman introduced him to instru-

mentation. MDs are not trained in this aspect of research. “He (Chapman) made me lose any fear of instruments,” Goñi explains.

When his postdoc came to an end, Goñi received a call from former professor at the University of Navarra, Jose Maria Macarulla, who was starting a biophysics program at Basque University in Bilbao. Unable to resist the opportunity, Goñi joined him and helped create one of the first biophysics programs in Spain. Since

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then the program has flourished, and Goñi is now Professor and Head of the Biophysics Unit. His work continues to focus on membranes, specifically with interest in lipid-protein interactions in the field of lateral heterogeneity in membranes, membrane domains. He is now starting to apply new advanced fluorescence techniques, confocal or two photon fluorescence, and fluorescence correlation spectroscopy.

Goñi enjoys experimenting and feels fortunate that his wife, Alicia Alonso, is also a scientist. Goñi explains that they work well together because she is great at instrumentation while he prefers seeing and interpreting the results.

It was not until 1990 that Goñi attended his first Biophysical Society Annual Meeting. Before then, America was much farther away from Europe and, following his postdoc at

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a British institution, he had come away with certain prejudices of American life. However, they all blew away once he attended his first meeting. Since then, he has attended nearly all meetings. Joining the Society was a different story. At the time, most Europeans were not Society members, so he couldn't find two members to sign his application. He mailed his completed application to a member in the United States and asked him to find another person to sign. It worked and Goñi was admitted to the Society in 1995.

Since those days, Goñi has become an active participant in Society activities. In 2005, then-President-Elect Barry Lentz appointed him Chair of the Program Committee. “I already knew of his devotion to excellence as a scientist,” explains Lentz, “but I asked Felix to be Program Chair because I learned while visiting with him of his tremendous leadership and organizational abilities.” Lentz, Department of Biochemistry & Biophysics Director, Program in Molecular and Cellular Biophysics at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, adds that “as a Society, we owe him, not just for organizing a great program

that year, but also for giving us an example for how the job of Program Chair could and should be done.”

Goñi and his wife have two daughters, Ines, 21 and Helena, 17. His theory that “children imitate unconsciously and hate consciously what their parents do,” turned out to be true. Neither girl studies science. Ines is currently studying modern languages and Helena is preparing to enter college. To those



Felix Goñi singing Masterclass in Nice, France, with pianist Paloma Camacho and world-acclaimed teacher Dalton Baldwin. (Photo M.L. Demangeat).

The work was well worth it, according to Goñi. “The Biophysical Society provides simply the best meetings in biophysics in the world and the best by far journal in Biophysics.” he says. Goñi is also active in other societies, most notably the Federation of European Biochemical Societies, where he is chair of the publications committee.

who know and work with him, Goñi is the consummate gentleman with an incredible sense of humor. “I spent about two weeks with him and the folks in his department talking membranes,” says Lentz. “It was a delightful time. Aside from being a top-notch scientist, he is an accomplished singer and made a spectacular tomato sauce!”

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