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Biophysicist in Profile

Patricia Sokolove

Patricia Sokolove is living proof that a career in biophysics is exactly what you make it. It was her father, a civil engineering professor at the University of Illinois, who, along with encouraging her to make the most of math and science opportunities, first instilled this idea in her. “He made it clear that I could undertake any career I wanted,” Sokolove says. The career for which she has ultimately become known? Mentor.

The current Deputy Director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Intramural Training & Education (OITE) encountered her first science mentor in high school, when her chemistry teacher *Carolyn Conrad*, urged her husband, *Ed Conrad*, a faculty member of the Department of Biochemistry at the University of Illinois, to create a summer job for Sokolove in his lab. Sokolove returned to the lab every summer until her graduation from Radcliffe College, where she completed her AB in Biology. “His patience was remarkable!” Sokolove says of Conrad. “He made certain personally that I knew what was expected from each experiment and then gave me the freedom to make it work.”

She completed her PhD dissertation, which dealt with using mutant strains of *Chlamydomonas reinhardtii* to investigate photosynthetic electron transport, at Harvard University. “I began the project focused on genetics,” she recalls, “but the publication of *Peter Mitchell’s* chemiosmotic hypothesis, which suggested that the high-energy intermediate linking electron transport to phosphorylation was a proton gradient, diverted me into biophysics.” She then took a teaching position at Stanford University, but five years later found herself back in the lab for what she refers to as a “remedial postdoc” at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

By the time she joined the University of Maryland School of Medicine, it “was a hotbed of research in biophysics!” she says. “*Giuseppe Inesi* was Chair of Biochemistry, *Mordecai Blaustein* chaired Physiology, and *Edson Albuquerque* was the chair of my department, Pharmacology & Experimental Therapeutics.” She started attending Biophysical Society Annual Meetings, which “provided an outstanding opportunity to introduce my graduate students to leading investigators in our area and related disciplines.” One of these investigators was *Casey Kinnally*. “We collaborated on a project that spanned several years about the opening of channels in the mitochondrial inner membrane, i.e., the so-called ‘permeability transition pore,’” Kinnally says. She found Sokolove to be a rewarding collaborator. “Pat’s published many articles and held significant extra-

mural funding for her projects.”

Sokolove’s reputation as a superior mentor was now beginning to blossom. “As a mentor, she was always available, always understanding, and always low key enough for the students to feel comfortable,” says *Robert Bloch*, director of the Training Program in Membrane Biology in the Department of Physiology at the School of Medicine. “She was the person that students would go to for advice before speaking with anyone else.”

Joann Boughman, then Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the Graduate School, must have noticed, for she offered Sokolove a position as Associate Dean of the Graduate School and Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs. It began as a part-time position, but when it became too mentally challenging to allow time for research, Sokolove closed her lab.

“Problem solving, figuring out how a system worked, had always been what attracted me to research,” she says. She effectively carried this concept into her new position. “She was never content with simply managing the graduate school, but continually strived to further improve our programs, and the graduate school as a whole,” says *Asaf Keller* of the Department of Anatomy & Neurobiology at the School of Medicine, who worked with Sokolove to establish the campus-wide Program in Neuroscience. Sokolove indeed transformed the Graduate School. She implemented career development lectures and workshops and established a Writing Center. And, of course, she excelled at mentoring the graduate students. “Pat was always very warm, intelligent, and truly cared about the needs of graduate students,” says *Robert Mitkus*, an officer in the Graduate Students Association (GSA) at the time. “The students simply loved her!” Keller adds.

In 2002, Boughman left the university, and with her went Sokolove’s position. The heart and soul Sokolove put into improving the Graduate School and mentoring its students, however, will not be forgotten. “The GSA

board so esteemed Pat and her commitment to graduate students,” says Mitkus, “that when we found out that she was leaving the university, we named the Outstanding Mentor Award after her.” Today, recipients of the Dr. Patricia M. Sokolove Outstanding Mentor Award look upon the honor as a highlight of their careers.

Instead of reopening her lab, Sokolove turned to the Science and Technology Policy Fellowship Program, offered through the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). “It would be impossible to be too enthusiastic about the AAAS program,” she says. As a fellow, Sokolove went to the extramural side of the National Institute of Biomedical Imaging and Bioengineering (NIBIB) to work with founding and acting Director *Donna Dean*. “My background in biophysics helped me to feel comfortable with the Institute’s portfolio,” she says.

From the NIBIB, Sokolove moved to the OITE, and for the last five years has been supporting some 6,000 Intramural Research Program trainees at a time, helping them “develop scientific and professional skills that will enable them to become leaders in the biomedical research community.” The OITE offers orientations, career and professional development workshops, a Career Center, a Career Symposium to showcase career options for science PhDs, and a Graduate and Professional School Fair that serves as an active postbaccalaureate-recruiting ground for institutions nationwide. “We believe that the first priority of trainees must be doing good science and getting it published,” Sokolove says. “However, we strongly emphasize the importance of trainees’ looking ahead and taking the initiative to acquire the



Sokolove reading to her granddaughter.

professional skills they will need to succeed at the next level in their careers.

“Assessing your skills and interests and determining what career options might be a good fit makes sense,” Sokolove says. As a mentor at the OITE, she helps trainees find the tools with which to do this. “Pat is a wise, attentive, nurturing, and supportive mentor,” says *Catherine Swanwick*, who as a postdoc worked with Sokolove on FELCOM, the NIH Postdoctoral Fellows’ Committee. “She is genuinely interested in the well-being of trainees.” It was with the trainees in mind that Sokolove applied the same gusto she had lavished on the Graduate School to help OITE Director *Sharon Milgram* transform the OITE into the extraordinary resource it is today.

In the midst of sharing her time and energy with so many students and postdocs, Sokolove raised four children of her own. As Kinnally puts it, “She has successfully juggled having a

career, having a family, and being a wonderful friend.” Sokolove and her husband explore the world through cooking and travel, and she enjoys getting to know her three young grandchildren.

“No matter what career path you decide to pursue, it is important to succeed first as a scientist,” she counsels. “Publishing is just as important for a career in science policy as for a career in academics.” Her own success as a mentor comes from living by what she views as the “core of good mentoring.” Good mentors “listen, remember individuals and their problems, genuinely reach out to assist, are persistently optimistic, and manage to convey even negative input in a supportive way. They think not only outside the box but outside themselves . . . a good lesson.”

For more information about the IRP and the OITE, see the Careers article on page 9.



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