Message from the Chair

Greetings! Visitors, friends, supporters, and members of the Committee on the Status of Women in Microbiology (CSWM):

I’d like to direct your attention to our activities at the recent ASM General Meeting in Atlanta. Our Open Meeting was held on Tuesday, June 7 at the Omni Hotel. This was an open forum where participants voiced their issues and concerns about careers in Microbiology. The open meeting was immediately followed by our reception, a wonderful social event that gave everyone an opportunity to meet fellow microbiologists, network, and exchange ideas, all while enjoying some refreshments and spirits. It continues to be a popular, well-attended event.

Our scientific roundtable session, held on Wednesday, June 8, was standing-room-only and well-received. Our topic was “Communicating With the Public and Public Perception of Microbiological Issues.” Our speakers included Dan Rutz of the CDC, Mitch Waldrop of the NSF, Cynthia Needham of ICAN Productions, Maryn McKenna, journalist, at the Atlanta Constitution Journal, and Barbara Hyde, ASM’s Communications Director. Barbara conducted an interactive workshop on how to communicate with the media.

Photos of these exciting events are below.

Lorraine Findlay
CSWM Chairperson
Open Meeting (pictured from left to right: CSWM Committee Members Ellen Jo Baron, Marcia M. Moody, Sarah A. McIntire, Lorraine A. Findlay (chair), Alice N. Neely and Micah I. Krichevsky

Open Meeting Attendees
CSWM Reception
CSWM Reception
Special Address from the Alice Evans Award Winner

The Alice C. Evans Award recognizes an individual for major contributions toward the full participation of women in Microbiology. Established by the CSWM, the award is given in memory of Alice C. Evans, who in 1928 was the first woman to be elected president of what is now called ASM.

The 2005 recipient of this award was Dr. Helen Davies, Professor of Microbiology at the School of Medicine, University of Pennsylvania, and founding member of American Women in Science.

It gives the CSWM great pleasure to present the following special address for our newsletter from Dr. Davies.

Progress Depends Upon the Unreasonable Woman

by Helen C. Davies

In Man and Superman, George Bernard Shaw said, “The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.” As recently as 5/25/05 Matt Miller in a New York Times OP-ED, found Shaw’s 1903 witticism still wise enough to quote.

When we change the quotation to: “progress depends on the unreasonable woman,” we can find one answer to the question asked by Freud, “What does a woman want?” The solution is simple, replied one intentionally unreasonable woman to an antifeminist academic psychologist who flung Freud in her face back in the 1970s: “We want what men have but women don’t…” (and as visions of an admission to penis envy danced in his head, she continued) “…the right to be successful even when mediocre.”

In today’s climate I would add that we want men who are leaders in academe to examine the reasons for the scarcity of women in science and engineering faculties, and not just claim inherent differences between women and men as did the current Harvard President, Lawrence Summers. Ironically, it is possible that by citing “intrinsic aptitude” and innate gender difference Summers did us a favor in reminding us and proving to the world that the challenges women face in academic science are as real now as they were in 1970.
What can today’s women scientists learn from the past that could be effective in overcoming the discrimination that women still face? We could start by reviewing some lessons learned within our own lifetimes.

The milieu we live in could improve immeasurably if we occasionally remembered how much we owe to each other as well as to the many women, and some less numerous decent men, who have fought for our rights over time. We can all probably name pioneers in reproductive rights (Margaret Sanger); voting rights (Lucretia Mott, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton); and the struggle for an equal rights amendment (Alice Paul, who received her Ph.D. from my own University of Pennsylvania). Unreasonable women all! Or so said society at the time. It was a more recently “unreasonable” woman] who fought for the right to challenge discrimination in universities by gaining access to confidential files--Professor Rosalie Tung of Penn, who took her case for women and men to the United States Supreme Court, and got a unanimous nine-justice decision that the universities do not have a shield of secrecy in tenure disputes (New York Times 1/10/90). In effect the Court said that academic freedom is no defense for discrimination.

For me, a number of principles worth keeping alive are found in the experiences of an organization called WEOUP--Women for Equal Opportunity at the University of Pennsylvania. This group, described in “A Network of One's Own,” by Karen Childers, Phyllis Rackin, Cynthia Secor, and Carol Tracy, in an article published in the MLA’s 1981 book Rocking the Boat, was a coalition of faculty, staff and students who emphasized the “work” in “networking”. When they came together to work, in 1970, there were only about 12 of them, but they functioned as catalysts in a series of organizations until several thousand women were linked to each other on Penn's large campus. Some excerpts from the MLA article that I find relevant today:

Our fundamental strategy was stay in touch with other groups and help them when they needed it.

A critical mass of women dedicated to working effectively to eradicate discrimination can attract other women by succeeding, publicizing successes, and recruiting new women on the basis of their needs, skills, and tasks they can perform.

Class-consciousness and status gains, which are endemic to academic institutions, can lead women to work at cross purposes. Encourage mixed work teams.

Pressures falling on the most active members may lead to perception of being uncooperative with male colleagues. The group can give psychological encouragement and specific help and work on behalf of the woman's reputation.
Point up the falsehood of an affirmative action pledge of an institution that claims to seek good women, but cannot keep the ones it has.

It is necessary to accumulate resources for women, such as information, expertise, and money.

And some WEOUP achievements that carried out those principles:

We shared influence with other women.

We conferred self-confidence on one another, both formally and by word-of-mouth praise on the grapevine.

We put each other up for awards.

We understood that underrepresented minority groups are part of us...that nothing we asked for women would be at the expense of minorities. Instead of competing to get underrepresented minorities and women through the door, we would widen the door.

We found that with respect to nonfeminist women confrontation can be counterproductive and that patience is essential, particularly with those who are not yet with us--in other words, "You don't have to scratch a woman to find a sister, because the system will scratch her soon enough; just keep building the first-aid fund."

Plus, a useful thought for today's woman scientist:

We found a high correlation between incompetence and anti-feminism among males, and we examined the source of criticism. With whom is the detractor comparing this woman scholar: Einstein, or the last male the department hired?

Dare we hope to regain the spirit of that time, and be able to say again that "feminist" is not a dirty word? The need is as great as it ever was, though perhaps more subtle as small visible gains have been made (e.g., increased enrollment of women in graduate programs in science) without significantly affecting the make-up of many fields (hiring and advancement of women after the Ph.D. has stalled out or in many fields declined). Meanwhile, the top layer of decision-making remains largely white, male and self-replacing.]

Not having women and underrepresented minorities in positions of authority in the scientific establishment contributes to the disadvantage for individual careers. But the damage spreads far beyond that, as our history illustrates:

On 6/18/90 testimony was presented at a hearing at the U.S. House of Representatives Sub-committee on Health and the Environment, and the issue
was whether NIH was doing an adequate job of implementing its own policy to encourage the inclusion of women in studies that it funds. The answer was "No". For example, a study of 22,000 white male physicians that was started in 1981 demonstrated a beneficial effect of an aspirin every other day on coronary heart disease. Not a single women or African-American was included in this study.

Science 6/29/90 reported that other large epidemiological studies included no women at all or added them late in the protocol. The then-Representative Pat Schroeder said "American women have been put at risk by medical research practices that have failed to include women."

The scientific establishment, which was composed almost exclusively of white males when these decisions were taken is still largely the same, and it sits in judgment on issues which affect life in a racially, sexually, and culturally diverse society. We may wish to believe that gender or race of people in power has no effect on their values, priorities, or decisions; that the gender or race of the fund-givers has no effect on the type of research funded, on the type of disease or patient studied; that the gender or race of educators has no effects on the selection of subjects of scholarship, or on the achievements of their students. But that is not facing reality.

Society needs the scientific establishment to have a genuine feel for the human condition, to have a first-hand, rather than a vicarious, familiarity with problems and needs. In many areas our society has made an effort to create social institutions in which people of all kinds and sexes mingle, because we have a sense of the value of social integration and the peril of social isolation. Academia trails when it should be leading. We need to ensure that underrepresented minorities and women have a real opportunity to establish themselves in their professions. They should not be faced with a revolving door when it comes to tenure, which in turn limits their role in the development of graduate students who will form the next generation.

There is a new generation of “unreasonable" women coming of age. We can add to the roster of those to whom we owe much the name of Nancy Hopkins, who so thoroughly counted the ways that women were denied equal recognition and support at MIT that despite early dismissals of her data by male peers she succeeded not only in changing MIT, but in reopening the issue among Ivy institutions where reform began sooner but flagged. Now a consortium of the Ivy/MIT institutions is jointly exploring faculty hiring. The ensuing storm over Larry Summers has since resulted in the creation of a $50 million fund for the development of women faculty at Harvard.

The progress of the unreasonable woman indeed!
**Nominate, Nominate, Nominate**

The CSWM encourages everyone to nominate a candidate for the 2006 Alice C. Evans Award. This award is given to an ASM microbiologist, male or female, who has fostered the advancement of women in the field of microbiology.

The CSWM encourages the nomination of women for any award offered through ASM. Please nominate and support the nomination of women for these awards.

**Did You Know About MentorNet**

The MentorNet One-on-One Mentoring Programs are a chance to make a big difference in the life of a student in as little as 20 minutes a week. MentorNet seeks science and engineering professionals in industry and government, either currently active, on leave, or retired, to mentor community college, undergraduate and graduate students, particularly women, who are interested in pursuing a professional future in the male-dominated fields of engineering and science. MentorNet also seeks tenured faculty members to mentor graduate students, postdocs, and non-tenured faculty pursuing faculty careers.

Mentoring relationships last 8 months. Mentors and students communicate entirely by email. MentorNet’s research-based programs have proven effective by providing “real-world” information, encouragement, advice, and access to networks for students, particularly women.

For more information, go to: www.MentorNet.net

**Women’s Professional Registry**

The ASM Placement Committee maintains qualification records filed by members seeking new professional positions.

Three separate registries are maintained:
1. Standard Registry, contains all registrants.
2. Women’s Registry
3. Minorities’ Registry
The Committee and the Web

The CSWM Web address is: www.asm.org/policy/index.asp?bid=22282

Join the CSWM discussion group:

ASMWomeninMicro: www.asm.org/subscribe.asp

Our listserv discussion group ASMWomeninMicro can be accessed and joined from the CSWM website. This listserv enables subscribers to conduct ongoing discussions on pertinent issues, learn of various current events, share information with the group, make announcements, and interact with other women microbiologists. Subscribers will be able to search for individuals who wish to share lodgings and/or dinner during ASM-sponsored meetings.

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Watch for the Spring 2006 Edition of CSWM COMMUNICATOR!