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 Orlando. Our Open Meeting was held on Tuesday, May 23 at the Rosen Centre 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. It continues to be a popular, well-attended event.

Our scientific roundtable session, held on Monday, May 22, was well-received. Several attendees stated that it was our best session “ever.” Our topic was “Microbial Exotica and the Women Who Nurture Them.” Our speakers included Carol Litchfield, speaking on halophiles; Jean Brenchley, speaking on psychrophiles; Melissa Kendall, informing us about methanogens; and Hazel Barton, introducing us to mysterious cave microbiota. Hazel was the subject of an IMAX-produced film, “Journey into Amazing Caves,” that was shown at the session. The film thrilled, excited, and amazed our attendees; the only thing missing was the popcorn.

Enclosed are some photos of these exciting events.

Lorraine Findlay
CSWM Chairperson

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 2006 recipient of this award was Dr. Joan Bennett, of Tulane University, who, at the time, was a resident of Katrina-stricken New Orleans.

It gives the CSWM great pleasure to present the following special address for
My Story: On Receiving the Alice Evans Award

by Joan Bennett

Introduction

It is an unexpected satisfaction to receive an award for activities that I have done for the joy of it. My thanks go to Dr. King-Thom Chung for nominating me and to the Committee for Women in Microbiology for choosing me to be the recipient of the Alice Evans Award for 2006. In his citation, Dr. Chung emphasized the course I developed at Newcomb College of Tulane University entitled the “Biology of Women,” and some of the spin off lectures that developed out of teaching that course, e.g. “Anatomy destiny, myth and metaphor” and “Thundering ovaries.”

Being invited to write this essay gives me an opportunity to tell you my story. It is the story of how a young fungal geneticist with three degrees in botany came to be involved in helping to found a university women’s center and in teaching a course on “The Biology of Women.”

Getting a “real job”

I was hired by Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana, in a tenure track position in the Department of Biology in 1971. The salary was less than I had been earning as a U. S. Department of Agriculture Research Associate, but I never thought to negotiate for more. I was grateful. For years, people had been telling me that “Tulane’s biology department doesn’t hire women” so the fact that I had been offered a job made me feel special. In addition to the low salary, my job offer came without a “start up” package. I had never heard of start up packages, so how could I know to ask for one? I thought it was a level playing field and that all new assistant professors were given little more than an empty laboratory and an opportunity to prove oneself. My empty laboratory was on the fourth floor in a brand new science building called Percival Stern Hall. There were no stains from chemicals in the hood; the lab benches were gleaming; the built-in drawers were clean and fresh. Some hand-me-down lab equipment and supplies were made available. They were left over from a departed assistant professor who had failed to get tenure the year before. His discards included enough agar and other basic microbiological supplies to get me started.

How proud and happy I was with that shiny, new laboratory! For the first time in my career, I was completely on my own. I could design my own experiments and chose the direction of my future research. Unlike Virginia Wolff’s hypothetical woman who never had “a room of her own,” I was a young woman scientist who had “a lab of her own.” Not long afterwards, when I learned that the male assistant professor who was hired at the same time had been given
a fairly generous start-up package for buying equipment and supplies, I realized that his social networks had provided information that I lacked. All the same, even now looking back, I remember how my elation over having both a laboratory and a tenure track job overshadowed my anger at the low salary and lack of research support from the university. I had been given a chance. Earlier generations of professional women rarely got that chance. Most of them had to content themselves with temporary academic appointments, usually dependent on a male scientist for laboratory space and for their sliver of legitimacy. Women of my era were rather like immigrants to the USA. We were let in to the “new country” of academic appointments. Many of us expected to make do with less and to earn lower salaries in exchange for opportunities that hadn’t existed before. For most immigrants, “the old country” had not provided enough economic opportunity. For women, our “old country” was not only a lack of economic opportunity, but more importantly, social and legal barriers. When feminists of the 1960s and 1970s put political pressure on the American legal system, unprecedented options opened for all women. I was one of the early beneficiaries.

**A colloquium on women and more**

My second year on the faculty, a university wide announcement was posted by Professor Jean Danielson, Department of Political Science, advertising a special “colloquium on women” to be offered during the spring semester of 1973, at Newcomb College, the women’s college at Tulane. Although I had never met Prof. Danielson, I called her and asked if I could audit her class. Her response was unexpected. She invited me to participate as one of the instructors. She sweetened her offer by also asking me over to dinner with several other faculty members from the colloquium. My husband agreed to babysit for our two young children, one still in diapers, and I went to Jean Danielson’s dinner party. I felt privileged to be included in an almost intimidating group of self assured and highly independent women. One memory from the evening is that, after drinking a lot of wine, we all got into an argument about the definition of the word “minority.” The two scientists among us, a psychologist named Barbara Moeley and I, argued that minority meant less than 50%, and that therefore women were not a minority. Some of the other women said that minority referred to groups that were discriminated against and that therefore women were a minority. It was an early introduction to the fervor that language can evoke. At the time, I was quite certain that the definition of any given word could be uniformly stipulated and that I was “right.” Now, more than 30 years later, I am not so certain. Even though women constitute more than 50% of the population, we remain numerically low in positions of power. The women in the room were using the same word in several different ways. With time, I’ve become more cognizant of the fuzziness of language and more tolerant of the perspectives of others.

During the first meeting of the Colloquium on Women, to a class of approximately 15 Newcomb students, Professor Danielson outlined our course
goals to evaluate the role of women in contemporary society. She said she planned to give a “broad” overview of women’s issues. Jean has a wonderful laugh. Soon, the whole class joined her laughter when we realized she was using “broad” as both a noun and an adjective.

Unfortunately, the class roster from that first colloquium has been lost. The university did not keep computer records until several years later; I’ve forgotten the names of the students who were enrolled; thus, I have no way of contacting them. They were a wonderful class. I would love to know what has happened to them (and I find it hard to believe that they are in their 50’s now).

One student, in particular, stands out in my memory. She was a good-looking young woman from New York City with beautiful, thick black hair. When the weather got warm she wore sleeveless tops to class. Whenever she leaned back in her chair and folded her hands behind her head she revealed a lush growth of dark underarm hair. I, who had never questioned the unwritten social rule that dictated that American women were supposed to shave their underarms, thought that this beautiful young woman symbolized women’s liberation.

My assignment in the Colloquium was to develop a lecture entitled “Biology of Women”. Undaunted by the prospect of covering the topic in two hours, I created an outline of all the areas that I thought were relevant: anatomy, menstruation, birth control (including abortion), pregnancy, child birth, lactation, sex determination, female specific diseases and life expectancy. Afterwards, one of the other faculty members (whose name I am forgetting) pointed out that I had left out “menopause” and another one, Virginia Ktsanes, from the Tulane School of Public Health, told me that I needed some demonstration materials. Prof. Ktsanes then sent me a package of contraceptives: a diaphragm, several brands of condoms, two kinds of intrauterine devices (IUDs), a month’s supply of birth control pills, and some spermicidal foam. The next year, when the Colloquium was taught again, I included menopause to my presentation. In addition, I expanded the material on birth control into an entire class session of its own. In those innocent pre-H.I.V. days, opening a package of Trojans and unrolling a rubber prophylactic in front a group of female undergraduates was considered pretty daring.

Meanwhile, Jean Danielson had been talking to the dean of Newcomb College. Her inspiration and activism led to administrative discussions about the possibility of establishing a women’s center. An ad hoc committee was established under the leadership of the associate dean, Dr. Joseph Cohen, to investigate the feasibility of opening a campus center entirely focused on women’s issues. One of my first committee assignments at Tulane was to serve as a member of that committee. After some alumnae fund raising, The Newcomb Women’s Center was opened in 1975 with an emphasis on programs for non-traditional women students. As time passed, the center increasingly focused on feminist research and teaching, so that in 1985 it was renamed the Newcomb College Center for Research on Women (NCCROW). The center sponsored faculty research circles and brown bag lunches, and collaborated with faculty in the formation of a minor, and then a major, in women’s studies. In the
three decades since it was founded, NCCROW has expanded its activities to maintain the Archives of Newcomb College as well as a circulating library of books and periodicals in women’s studies; to sponsor small grants, public lectures and symposia; and to disseminate relevant scholarship about women, especially southern women. I have served two terms on the Women’s Center Committee, first in 1977-1979 and then again from 1983-1986. More recently, after the Tulane faculty established and approved a curriculum for an academic major in Women’s Studies, I have also served on the Women’s Studies Committee (2001-2005). It has been satisfying to see both NCCROW and the academic program thrive, with strong faculty support from the humanities and the social sciences. On the other hand, I have been disappointed that participation of faculty from the natural sciences has been low.

Eventually, my two lectures in the Colloquium on Women expanded into an entire course on The Biology of Women, first offered during the spring semester of 1976. I spent many hours in the library at the Tulane Medical School teaching myself the basics of obstetrics and gynecology and regularly getting upset at the highly chauvinistic language of the textbooks in the field. The following year, pregnant with my third child, I observed my own gestation and parturition with a different eye than my first two experiences, and incorporated some of these personal observations into my course. In 1982, the class was renamed Biology of Human Reproduction to make it sound less sexist. Since its inception, the course has been my most popular offering.

What about the big picture?

During the years I have participated in women’s activities at Newcomb College of Tulane University, American women have changed many aspects of higher education, our health care system and our nation’s economic welfare. Objectives that were seen as bold new possibilities in 1975 are now commonplace realities. Programs in women’s studies are no longer controversial. Young women are more knowledgeable about their bodies than were women in my era. Our voices are heard in the scientific community in a way that was unforeseen when I was a graduate student. But, when all is said and done, women continue to be underrepresented in the professions, especially in the physical sciences and engineering. We are particularly underrepresented in senior positions. A recent study by the Sloane foundation showed that barriers for women include feelings of isolation, low self-esteem and financial pressures. Women often have less confidence in their abilities than do men. Across the board, women’s income is lower than that of men. In 2000, women earned an average of 20.3% less than men. The gap between the wages of men and women has remained the same (at 20%) for more than a decade. Representative Carolyn Maloney of New York said, “It seems that still, at the root of it all, men get an inherent annual bonus just for being men.”

Moreover, women continue to live with the expectations and prejudices of traditional society. We are expected to be “feminine” (although the standards of femininity vary widely from culture to culture and from era to era). We are
expected to do most of the house work and childcare. Professional women feel
the challenge of having to be almost perfect.

For those of us who have managed to raise a family while simultaneously
working outside the home, the psychological advantages of having a meaningful
career are obvious. A study reviewed in the science section of the New York
Times on Tuesday, May 23, 2006, did not surprise me. A British group had
followed 1171 women born in 1946. Those who had taken on multiple roles as
mothers, wives and employees had better health than those who had not. Initial
good health was not a predictor of taking on extra roles – it was the other way
around. Good health among this cohort of women was correlated with
combining marriage, child rearing and work outside the home. In summary,
women who defied traditional roles were healthier than those who had abided by
societal norms.

Putting it all together

For more than 30 years, most of my energies were devoted to my
scientific endeavors: teaching genetics, running a laboratory, serving on editorial
boards and as editor of professional journals, and holding a number of elected
offices in the American Society for Microbiology and the Society for Industrial
Microbiology. My feminist work at Newcomb College was a side-line that I did
because I loved it. For example, despite the popularity of my Biology of
Women/Human Reproduction course, my department never accepted it as
anything but an elective in our departmental course offerings. In recent years, I
was under pressure to stop teaching it entirely. Nevertheless, my work on
behalf of women has had an unexpected impact on my professional life. It has
provided me with experience and career credentials I never expected to use.

In August 2005, after Hurricane Katrina, my home in New Orleans
flooded. A few months later, Tulane University underwent major reorganizations
that included the closing of Newcomb College and the School of Engineering as
well as the dismissal of over 200 tenured faculty members. Although I was not
fired, the loss of my home, coupled with the unhappy changes in the university I
had loved and served so long, made me decide that it was time to move on. As
of July 1, 2006, I have started a new job at Rutgers University, New Brunswick,
New Jersey. In addition to my responsibilities for teaching and research in the
Department of Plant Biology and Pathology, I will also serve as in a newly
created position as Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs. My charge is
to further the advancement of women in science, technology, engineering,
mathematics and the health professions at Rutgers University. The need for
improving the science and technology base in the United States by expanding
the participation of women has become a journalistic cliché. Whereas many
universities pay lip service to gender equity but do not follow-up with top-down
leadership, Rutgers President Richard McCormick and Executive Vice President
Philip Furmanski have shown their genuine concern for women’s issues by
creating my position. I look forward to working with the Rutgers administration
and the many competent women on the science and engineering faculties at my
new place of work.

In conclusion

I am proud to be a scientist and proud to be a feminist. During the early 1970s, feminists often were trivialized as “women’s libbers” and “bra burners” (despite the lack of evidence that anyone actually ever burned a single bra.). Sadly, for many women today, especially young women, the very word “feminist” has negative connotations. Nevertheless, in my lifetime, I have seen feminism change our culture for the better. Yes, there is still a glass ceiling. Yes, women are still under-represented in science and many other professions. Yes, more can be done. In particular, men and women should work together to change the balance between family life and work demands. Economically, too many women are still “just a divorce away from poverty.” But the overall trend is positive. It gives me great satisfaction to be part of a generation that has opened so many doors for women.

Let me end with a quote from Dr. Antonia Coello Novello, the former Surgeon General of the U.S., who during a lecture at Douglass College (the women’s college at Rutgers University) last winter, said: “To those who live with glass ceilings, I say: ‘Let us teach them how to throw stones.’ ”

Joan W. Bennett

Nominate, Nominate, Nominate

The CSWM encourages everyone to nominate a candidate for the 2007 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.

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:

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.

*******************************************************************************************

Photos from 2006 CSWM General Meeting Events

Open Meeting
Reception

Watch for the Spring 2007 Edition of CSWM COMMUNICATOR!