

Laura Schweitzer, Ph.D. '79, Blazes New Trails

By Gerry Everding

A Washington University diploma -- doctor of psychology, 1979 -- always holds a prominent position in the office of Laura Schweitzer, recently named Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost-designate at SUNY Upstate Health Sciences University and Vice Provost for Academic Affairs and Health Liaison at the University of Syracuse.

Carefully framed in alma mater-green and gold, the diploma followed faithfully as Schweitzer completed a post-doctoral fellowship in neurobiology at Duke University, as she joined the research faculty at Duke, as she was named to the faculty of Anatomical Sciences and Neurobiology at the University of Louisville School of Medicine in 1988.

It was there as Schweitzer moved quickly through medical school administrative ranks at Louisville, accepting positions as associate dean for faculty affairs and subsequently, as associate vice president for health affairs in 1999. And, when Schweitzer was named interim dean of medicine in December 2003, the diploma offered testimony to her credentials as the first Ph.D. woman to ever hold the lead position in any U.S. medical school.

“I really owe Washington University for the rich life that I’ve had, for the rich career that my experience there helped make possible,” Schweitzer said. “I was so fortunate to be exposed to such a truly remarkable learning experience at that point in my career. It touched me and it changed my life. It has never left me.”

Schweitzer was admitted to graduate school at Washington University in 1974. She arrived feeling lucky to be here.

“I was their last choice,” she said. “I know that because I was the only student accepted without funding. Upon my arrival, Dr. Tom Sandel, the chair, informed me that he had secured funding for me. I was very happy. My parents were happier.”

Schweitzer, who grew up working in her parents’ hardware store in rural New York, recalls her first day on campus. She arrived in the evening, by herself. She

walked slowly across the quad and looked up into the lit arched windows of Holmes Lounge.

“I had arrived,” she thought. “I knew that if I succeeded in school here my life would be good. I would be called doctor. I was overwhelmed with emotion.”

Schweitzer soon found herself immersed in what she describes as an “amazingly tight” academic community.

“I was part of a large group of graduate students all admitted at the same time and we became very close,” she recalled. “I was in my early twenties and all of a sudden I was caught up in an incredible level of intellectual engagement.”

Schweitzer was something of an oddity -- the only person entering the graduate program in animal behavior psychology, an interest she developed while pursuing a degree in special education at the University of Miami.

“I got very interested in the brain and how it worked, how it processes information and learning,” she said. “I read and read and before long I was hooked. I switched my major to psychology with emphasis on the neurobiological basis of learning.”

Schweitzer’s interests drew her into the discipline at an exciting time.

During the previous two decades, brain studies in the traditional fields of biology, physiology, anatomy, chemistry and psychological physiology had experienced unprecedented growth and the lines between them began to blur. By the early 1970s, neuroscience had emerged as an interdisciplinary discipline in its own right and Washington University was at the forefront.

“Washington University was truly a powerhouse in developmental neurobiology while I was going there,” Schweitzer recalled. “I was surrounded by a faculty that clearly included the greatest of the greats in that discipline.”

A warm sense of awe still evident in her voice, Schweitzer rattles off a “who’s who” of famed researchers affiliated with the university during the late 1970s:

Viktor Hamburger, a giant in neurobiology, embryology and the study of programmed cell death, was here continuing his landmark work on chick embryos and spinal cord development. The former Edward Mallinckrodt Distinguished University Professor Emeritus in Arts & Sciences, Hamburger is considered “the

father of neuroembryology.”

Rita Levi-Montalcini, an early pioneer in neurophysiology, was then an emeritus professor of biology splitting time between the University and a research institute in Italy. In 1979, she presented a lecture here on 25 years of research on nerve growth factor, a protein that causes developing cells to grow by stimulating nerve tissue. In 1986, she would share a Nobel Prize for work in this area.

Maxwell Cowan, among the first self-defined neurobiologists, was busy building the School of Medicine’s Department of Anatomy and Neurobiology into one of the nation’s most important centers for neuroscience research. An early advocate for defining neuroscience as an inherently interdisciplinary field, Cowan helped launch the Annual Review of Neuroscience and was named co-editor of its inaugural issue in 1978.

“Washington University at that time was THE – capital T-H-E – place to be for developmental neurobiology,” she said. “The program was so strong and the people were so amazing that it was an absolutely incredible experience.”

As a student, Schweitzer recalls an “amazing course on biological bases of behavior” with Paul Stein in biology, as well as interactions with leading medical school faculty, such as Joel Price, professor of anatomy and neurobiology, and Dale Purves, now head of neurobiology at Duke University.

“I read all the material, prepared for class discussions and thrived,” she recalled. “Washington University was the environment in which I learned to be a critical thinker and a scholar.”

At the time, it seemed as though no one could get enough of neuroscience.

“All of the neuroscience group got together for a weekly journal club that focused on the history of neuroscience – the meetings took place at 8 o’clock on a Saturday morning and the room was always jam-packed,” she recalled. “Can you imagine that many people getting up on a Saturday morning to talk about the history of neuroscience?”

“It was an unbelievable atmosphere -- unlike anything I’ve experienced as an undergrad student or even later, as a post-doc. It really gave me an understanding of how dedicated a community could be to a love of lifelong learning.”

Schweitzer came here, in part, to work with Michael W. Fox, a respected veterinarian and animal psychologist now well known for his newspaper columns and popular books on animal care. In the early 1970s, Fox was an associate professor of psychology in Arts & Sciences studying the habits of dogs and wolves at the University's Tyson Research Center.

"Fox immediately started me on a project observing feral cats in an enclosure at Tyson," she said. Frankly, I hated that. But I loved the class work. As an undergraduate, I had not experienced the intellectual stimulation of small classes where real ideas were explored."

When Fox left the University in 1975, the psychology department recruited Len Green to take his place and Schweitzer became his first graduate student. She credits Green with fostering her strong work ethic.

"Len expected excellence from me. I responded by doing the best that I could do. He supported me but instilled in me a sense of independence and confidence that if I worked hard I could master and do just about anything," she said. "Professors work hard, he told me. All day. All night. Len can be assured that I learned this lesson well. Too well, some might say."

Schweitzer spent long evenings here doing dissertation research in a small basement lab in Eads Hall, then home of the psychology department. Her doctoral project on the memory for taste aversion learning involved drizzling garlic juice into the mouths of weanling rats.

"I'd seen something suggesting that garlic was one of the first things that babies can taste, so I got a huge container of garlic juice from some place on The Hill and used the juice as a stimulus," she recalls.

Schweitzer gave weanlings a taste of garlic, then an injection to make them sick. She went back later and tested to see if they had developed a garlic aversion.

"If you've ever eaten something that made you sick, then you understand the learning process. It's a defense mechanism. If a rat eats something new and different in the wild and it makes them sick, then they learn not to eat it again."

Designed to find the point in rat brain development where memory became possible, this study led her into a range of research on learning and memory development and the programming of memory over time.

In addition to Green, Schweitzer's primary faculty advisors were psychology professors Stanley Finger and Edwin Fisher. She credits Green with shaping the standard by which she would later deal with her own students, both graduate and undergraduate.

"Len expected all of his students to be excellent," she said. "Like Len, I've always included undergrads in my lab. Undergrads are so incredibly curious and energetic, so creative and quick to raise questions. They don't allow you to make statements based on assumptions. They ask the questions that force you to reconsider your own assumptions."

As a faculty member at Duke and Louisville, Schweitzer would become known as an expert in the development of the inner ear and brainstem nuclei involved in hearing and deafness. She published more than 45 papers and her research lab earned extensive funding from the National Institutes of Health.

Eventually though, her love of working with people would pull her out of the research lab.

"I started working with students in the lab and began to realize that I really liked the mentoring aspect of the work more than the research itself," Schweitzer said. "I got more satisfaction out of helping my students achieve some research accomplishment than in doing it myself."

In 1996, she accepted a position as dean of medical school faculty at Louisville, a job that required lots of time mentoring junior faculty.

"I loved it and people began to recognize that I was good at it," she said. "Of course, if you're any good at administration, people start asking you to do more of it."

In 2000, Schweitzer agreed to serve as dean of Louisville's School of Allied Health during a realignment that would close the school and shift its programs to other colleges. The transition was so successful that Schweitzer is now considered an expert on change management in higher education.

Her management abilities and track record of working closely with faculty and graduate students, led to her being named dean of the medical school in 2003. She now speaks nationally in the areas of faculty contracts, governance, promotion and

tenure, reward and recognition systems as well as mentoring and faculty career development.

While blazing new trails for women in medicine, Schweitzer has devoted much of her career to helping others do the same. During her tenure at Louisville, she boosted the number of women leaders in medicine, creating a formal mentoring program for female associate professors and redesigning the medical school's academic promotion system to help women achieve leadership positions. Recently, the Women's Center at Louisville recognized her contributions by awarding her their Mary K. Tachau Gender Equity Award.

Schweitzer credits her own career success to the support of her husband, Michael Gruenthal, whom she met while both were enrolled in the graduate program at Washington University. Gruenthal, who studied brain injury and recovery of function under Stan Finger, is now chair of neurology at Louisville. They have two children, ages 18 and 22, both of whom attend Washington University.

"I guess our love of Washington University was contagious," she said. "Mark, our oldest, vehemently stated he would not attend Wash U until he visited as a high school junior. I showed him the old haunts, the rooms where Michael and I fell in love, our neighborhoods, Blueberry Hill. We met Len and that was it, he was hooked. Eric's first exposure to Washington University was when we dropped Mark off in his dorm as a freshman. Mark was in Elliot and the scene was, well let's just say it was a scene! As we drove east on Highway 40 Eric declared that he was going to attend Wash U also. And he did, following an early admissions acceptance."

Schweitzer remains involved with Washington University, serving on the National Council for the Undergraduate Experience since 2002. She and her husband also support an undergraduate scholarship.

She also has been active in the leadership of other nonprofit and community groups, including the Chance School Board, the Star Autism Initiative, Louisville Deaf Oral School and the Parkinson's Foundation.

On a professional level, she is past head and program director of the American Association of Medical Colleges National Group on Faculty Affairs, a group of faculty deans from 126 medical schools. She is on the faculty for the Executive Leadership in Academic Medicine Program and both the AAMC Women in Medicine and the Minority Faculty programs.

She advises other women pursuing careers in management to seek a level of balance in their lives, to accept that we can't do everything perfectly all the time. One of her strengths, she suggests, is "that I have the ability to understand my limitations and I'm not ashamed to ask for help and advice."

Lastly, but perhaps most important, she advises that women never underestimate their potential.

"If people work hard enough, they can be just about anything they want to be. People need to be willing to take opportunities when they are provided, and seek out opportunities when they are not always apparent. Who would have ever believed that little girl growing up in a hardware store in New York would end up as the first female Ph.D. (medical school) dean in U.S. history?"

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