

The Long and Winding Road

Gail Hartmann Webster



I can't remember a time during my precollege education when I didn't think that teaching would be a great profession for me. I was always the kid who enjoyed helping my classmates with their work, or the children I babysat with their homework. I also remember getting very frustrated if I didn't understand something as quickly as I thought I should be able to. I can see all of these traits at play as I've made my way from high school through college and graduate school and back to the classroom as a professor.

I was very fortunate to go to a great high school in southeastern Virginia. My teachers were excellent and my classmates were too. At one point, I think I counted that there were at least five of us in my graduating class who went on to get Ph.D.s. During high school I was continually challenged by my teachers and my classmates to push myself academically. I took two years of high school chemistry "back in the day" before Advanced Placement courses were all the rage. My high school teacher was a former industrial chemist, and I'm sure she let us do experiments in class that would never be allowed anymore. But, it was fun, it was challenging, and I enjoyed it. I liked chemistry so much that I decided to go to college to be a pharmacist.

I attended Virginia Commonwealth University and completed two years of a pre-pharmacy curriculum and entered pharmacy school on VCU's medical campus

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in my third year of college. It wasn't what I expected. I sat in a room with about one hundred other students, and the professors changed every hour or so for the next class. Occasionally, we had breaks in the day, and there were some labs, but what I remember most is sitting in the same room for most of the day and then studying like crazy at night for tests. When the summer came, I did a required externship (essentially an internship, but not supervised by the college) at a local pharmacy near my house. It was an awful experience for me. I disliked the job. My particular experience didn't give me hope that it would be a profession with much room for intellectual growth. I left pharmacy school and went back to VCU, but this time, I was an education major and a chemistry minor. It was during this time of transition that I met my husband, Jeff. He was working as a researcher at the medical campus of VCU and he came to see me over that summer and helped me get through a very confusing time.

I took more chemistry classes than required for chemistry minor. I took the full year of physical chemistry that was not required and I also did a year of undergraduate research, which was a major influence on my career path. My last semester of college was supposed to be spent student teaching. I say "supposed" because I was asked to leave student teaching early and head to northern Virginia to interview for an unexpected opening for a chemistry teacher. A teacher left her position on disability and the students were experiencing a revolving door of substitutes. I was doing well in my student teaching, so my faculty advisor recommended me for the position and suggested that I interview. I was offered the position and VCU let me leave my classes early that semester. I became a full-time chemistry (and physics) teacher. I graduated from VCU in May and finished teaching my classes in June.

My year of undergraduate research with Sarah Rutan at VCU was instrumental (pun intended) in my decision to become an analytical chemist. I thoroughly enjoyed working with her and the graduate students in the lab. Sarah encouraged me to present my work at meetings, and more importantly, she encouraged me to apply to graduate school. In the meantime, Jeff and I became engaged and when grad school entered the picture, we decided to apply together (him for biochemistry and me for analytical chemistry), then see where we got in, get married, and move on with our lives. I think Jeff was even more insistent that I apply for graduate school than Sarah. A graduate degree was never in my original plans. Neither of my parents went to college, and just getting a B.S. degree was good enough for me. Looking back, I realize how lucky I was to have a professor take so much time and energy to help me realize I had the ability to get in and get through graduate school. I also know that I am even more fortunate that I found Jeff and his unwavering support.

Jeff and I entered graduate school at North Carolina State University two weeks after we were married. I'm not sure if I'd recommend that for anyone, but that's what we did! My lack of confidence resulted in my entering grad school in a master's program. Jeff knew he wanted a Ph.D., but I wasn't so sure. I found a great research group to join, but my advisor never had much grant money. All of the grad students in my group were teaching assistants, and for me, being a teaching assistant was the best part of graduate school. At NC State, I had some wonderful

mentors who knew I wanted to teach and supported me on my path. I remember Dr. Forrest Hentz telling me one day, “Gail, you’ve got to get your union card if you want to teach, and it needs to have three letters.” Well, I decided that IF I could get my M.S. THEN I would stay on and get the “union card.” I did, but it took me longer than most folks because I spent a good amount of time teaching, tutoring, and running a supplemental instruction program in addition to doing my research.

Meanwhile, my husband stayed focused in the lab, finished his degree, and started a postdoc at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. He had some great offers for postdocs at some incredibly prestigious places, but since I wasn’t finished yet, he stayed in the area for me. I am a lucky woman! At this point, I was getting anxious to start a family. I became pregnant, had a miscarriage, and became awfully discouraged. Several months later, I got pregnant again, and this time, there were no issues. I finished my last few experiments, had a baby, and wrote my dissertation. Caroline Webster entered the world the February before I graduated in May. Sometimes, I don’t know how I ever finished. But, then I remember the days of writing like a fiend when she was sleeping, which wasn’t often those first few months. . . boy was she colicky! I also remember Jeff coming home from UNC, us having a quick dinner, and then him going back to NC State with me at night while I sat at the computer in the lab and worked. He would walk laps around the building with the baby while I typed and did data analysis.

I defended my dissertation when Caroline was three months old. I nursed her just before I went to do my seminar and have my final oral exam, and she promptly threw up all over me. One of the departmental administrative assistants noticed the barf all over my shoulder and down my back and alerted me of the situation. I told her, “Well, maybe they won’t keep me quite as long!” What could I do, really?



Gail’s Ph.D. graduation from North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC in December 1994. Jeff Webster is the proud husband and father, Gail in the regalia, and Caroline Webster, 10 months old, is in her Wolfpack Red Christmas finery

Just after Caroline was born, I saw an ad in our local newspaper for a teacher at the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics (NCSSM). NCSSM is a public, residential high school for academically talented juniors and seniors. With Jeff in the middle of a postdoc, with pharmaceutical companies in Research Triangle Park downsizing, I was pretty limited about what I could do next. None of the big universities in the area would hire me to do anything other than teach labs, and postdocs in analytical chemistry in the area were scarce. So, I applied for the job and started teaching in the fall.

It wasn't easy being a working mom, with a postdoc husband, and no family nearby. We bought a house a few years into graduate school, so with a mortgage and day care, money was pretty tight. I found a great in-home day care for Caroline near my work place. I commuted about forty-five minutes each way, so I had time in the car with her. My job at NCSSM was a great experience. My students were engaged and fun to be with. My colleagues taught me more about running a general chemistry lab program than I ever learned in graduate school or from my teacher education program in college. The difficult thing was what to do when either Caroline was sick, or the babysitter was sick. NCSSM didn't have substitute teachers, and we had no family nearby to help out. Jeff was always the one who stayed home with the sick baby, and he'd go in at night or stay later to make up for his lost time. There were several times I had to take Caroline with me to school, and I often got some of the students to help me with her. I don't think my colleagues approved, but I did what I needed to do to keep my job and to help Jeff make progress in his work as well. I always kept my eyes open for other opportunities too.

I taught at NCSSM for two years. Each summer, I applied for a summer program for high school teachers at the National Institutes of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) a division of the National Institutes of Health located in Research Triangle Park, NC. It was an opportunity for me to continue to be research active when I didn't have many other opportunities to be in the lab. I worked at NIEHS for two summers doing molecular biology. In my second summer at NIEHS, my graduate research advisor called me and told me that NC State had a job that had "Gail Webster" all over it. The chemistry department was hiring two teaching faculty to work in the general chemistry program and work toward reform in the chemistry curriculum. I wanted this job. However, I knew I was pregnant. I thought I should just let this opportunity go, and be satisfied where I was, even though I wanted to work at the college level with all of my heart. I didn't know what to do and I remember talking to my mom about it. I clearly remember her saying, "Gail, it's 1996, women have babies and work. If you don't apply you'll never know if you can do it." So, I applied, I interviewed while I was twelve weeks pregnant, and I was offered the job. I might add that I was offered the job even though I was told that the department chair said he would never hire an NC State graduate. As a part of the interview for the position, I also had to do a research seminar for a 100% teaching job, so my work at NIEHS was essential for me to be able to give a presentation on something other than my graduate work.

Working at NC State was great. I was closer to home, Caroline was in day care near Jeff's work (his advisor moved from UNC to NIEHS), and I loved teaching chemistry at the college level. Those professors at NC State who had been great

mentors during graduate school were continuing to be mentors at the beginning of my career. When teaching schedules were being decided for the spring semester, I was in a bit of a quandary. I had to tell folks I was pregnant, since the baby was due at the beginning of the spring semester. When I told my direct supervisor, I will never forget what he did. He threw a pencil across his desk and said, "I knew this was going to happen." He told me I was responsible for finding someone to teach my classes. He was clearly angry and didn't give me any support. I was upset. Here I was, the first teaching faculty member to have a baby in the chemistry department at NCSU...in 1997. I asked to be given a night teaching assignment and told him I'd be back at work as soon as possible after the baby arrived. I was very proud of myself for keeping my cool during this conversation. As soon as our meeting was over, I went to my Ph.D. advisor's office, walked in, shut the door, told him my story, and I cried. He was so calm and said, "Gail, this is academia. We help each other. I'm happy to take your courses while you're gone." And so he did. I'll always be thankful to my advisor and mentor, Chuck Boss, for helping me when I needed it through graduate school and in my role as a visiting assistant professor.

Rebecca Webster was born in late January. I had two weeks at home with her, and then I started back to work teaching my evening class. I regret not having more time with her at home to this day. No woman should ever feel like they have to go back to work so quickly after giving birth. It was difficult, and Becky had jaundice soon after birth so I was really worried about her health. It was not an easy start for us. I was fortunate that instead of teaching two classes, my load was reduced to one class that semester. I would arrive at work with Becky in a stroller, and Jeff would meet me in the lecture hall on his way home with our two year old and take both girls home with him while I taught my class. I have to say, I had the most amazing group of students that semester. They sent me so many kind notes and e-mails, that I'm still touched by their kindness.



Gail and her husband with their daughters Rebecca (five months old) and Caroline (three years old). This photograph was taken in the summer of 1994 in Corolla, NC in the Outer Banks

Later that spring I interviewed for the coordinator of general chemistry labs at NC State, and I got the job. I moved into an administrative position and I wasn't teaching anymore. It wasn't my ideal job, but I needed something more than a one-year contract. Jeff was coming to the end of his postdoc and he was starting to interview for jobs. I realized that he had a greater earning potential than I did and I was willing to move wherever we needed to be to take care of our family. At the end of that fall semester we moved from North Carolina to Delaware for Jeff to begin his job at DuPont Pharmaceuticals.

We moved in December, after I made sure the teaching assistants turned in all the grades for the many sections of general chemistry lab. Jeff moved to Delaware before I did. I had to finish up the semester, get the house on the market, and get us moved. Not as easy as it sounds, but I did it. I had no job, but I was able to spend some great time with our girls. While I wasn't scouring the job listings, I was looking a bit. I found a temporary teaching assignment in Philadelphia, about thirty minutes from our home in Wilmington, DE. I worked there for a year, but with two children in day care, the expenses didn't justify the work. I left after a year and was at home again with my girls.

The October after I left my job in Philadelphia, Bristol Myers Pharmaceuticals bought DuPont Pharmaceuticals. Massive layoffs occurred, and my husband was out of work, and I wasn't working either. I felt awful that I did not have a full-time job to help us through such a difficult time. I found a part-time job tutoring, but I knew I needed to make sure I never put us in such a position again.

In April, Jeff started a job in High Point, North Carolina, at a small biotech company. I followed in June after Caroline finished second grade. Again, I got the house sold and got us moved back to North Carolina. I stayed at home the first year we were in North Carolina. Caroline was in third grade and Becky started kindergarten. I was able to volunteer in their school. I got in touch with some of my former colleagues when we moved back. One kept sending me job announcements and encouraged me to start applying. She sent me a job posting for teaching summer school at Guilford College, a small liberal arts college in Greensboro, very close to our home. I applied and got the job. I started teaching at Guilford College in the summer of 2003 and I've been there ever since, but it hasn't been easy.

I began working at Guilford as a visiting assistant professor in summer school. I let my colleagues in the department know I wanted more, and I was offered a job as a lab manager (part-time) and as a part-time instructor, teaching two classes the following fall. My two part-time jobs did not add to a full-time job, but I did it anyway. I did it because my colleagues in the department were awesome. They were supportive, they offered help, they listened when I had ideas, and teaching was truly important. My teaching job in Philadelphia was the opposite. I honestly never thought I'd teach again after that year. I was told so many times at my former job that teaching was important, but when it came time to hire, the only consideration was research, which was not my strength.

After a year as the part-time lab manager, the college hired a full-time lab manager and moved me to a full-time visiting assistant professor. I worked as a visiting assistant professor until 2006. That August, I began a tenure-track position. I changed my area of research from analytical chemistry to chemistry education, and I received tenure in 2010. From 2003 until 2010 Jeff was my anchor. He helped out with the girls more than anyone can imagine. He went to all of the programs at school. He took time from work when they were sick. I was never the one to stay at home with them or to take them to the doctor. He ran them around to more practices and early evening activities than most dads ever would. I missed Becky's kindergarten graduation, I missed both girls' fifth-grade promotion ceremonies, and I missed Caroline's eighth-grade graduation ceremony. I gave up a lot to prove that I was worthy of tenure. 2009 was a tough year for us. The biotech where Jeff worked started doing layoffs and he lost his job in January 2009. The recession was in full swing, and he didn't find a job until January 2010. The job was in Seattle, Washington.

Since I was waiting to hear about tenure, I didn't want to give up my job and move to Seattle. I stayed in North Carolina with the girls, now in tenth grade and seventh grade, and tried to keep things together while he started his new job at a contract research organization. It wasn't easy raising two adolescent girls, keeping up with their activities, working full-time, taking care of the house and doing all of the professional things one needs to do as an academician. Jeff got back to North Carolina once a month to see us, and the first July he was in Seattle, the girls and I flew out and visited him for a month. We never seriously considered moving across the country, although there were times I wanted to throw in the towel and move! It's a good thing we chose to tough it out. In 2013, the site he worked in was shut down and he moved back to High Point.

We are now back living together. Jeff works about an hour away, and I'm still at Guilford. My oldest went to college to study music performance in oboe, but she's taken a bit of time off from school. I think she had it especially tough when her dad moved across the country and we have some things to work through. My youngest is a junior in high school and dually enrolled in high school and college through a partnership program with our local school system and Guilford College. I love having her close to me at work. She is involved in issues surrounding social justice and she's starting to look at colleges. It's an exciting time for her and for me too!

I am thankful to be working at an institution that values undergraduate education. I cannot imagine having to put research above my undergraduate students. There's something very special about teaching at a small liberal arts college. It's a lot of work and there's not much administrative support, but it's a great job and I have a supportive network of colleagues at Guilford and across the country that I've met through various professional organizations. There have been times that I thought it would be easier to walk away rather than work through the difficulties, but I'm glad I've stuck with it, even through the frustrations. I didn't get tenure until I was in my late forties. I received my positive notice of tenure review while Jeff was in Seattle. It was bittersweet to read the letter, and not have him with me to celebrate. I got tenure, but I did not do it alone. My husband and my daughters have

been by my side this whole way, and I cannot imagine doing any of this without them. I couldn't have done it without Jeff, and there was never a time that I didn't imagine being a mom. So, while I got frustrated along the way because I wasn't getting "there" as fast as a lot of other women in chemistry, I have fulfilled two of my greatest ambitions: to be a professor and to be a mom.

For women entering the world of academia, my only advice is to do what you love and make decisions for your life based on your circumstances. There are women in the professoriate who came before me who would consider having a child in graduate school the wrong decision. They would advise women to wait until the postdoc or even to wait until post-tenure to start a family. My obstetrician told me that you cannot plan when you're going to have a baby. It happens when it happens, and I agree. If you wait too long, the biological clock can work against you. I've seen that happen to some of my friends and colleagues. I didn't want to be a mom in my mid to late thirties, and if I had waited until post-tenure to start a family, I doubt I would be a mom at all. My path to tenure was certainly a long one, and I've needed to step back, take a breath, and hope and pray that things would work out along the way. It hasn't been easy taking the long road, but I know I'm lucky that I have the support and love of a great family and that I get to go to work and do what I love every day.



Gail and Rebecca in the lab at Guilford College February 2014. Becky is 17 and a junior at The Early College at Guilford High School. She is taking chemistry at Guilford College

Interview Questions

1. How has deciding to start a family or having a family influenced your career? How has your career influenced your family?

Being married to a Ph.D. biochemist and having two children limited locations where I was willing to work. I didn't want to have a long commute, so I was willing to take positions that could have been career limiting (like teaching in a high school). I made the best of the situations, learned what I could at every step along the way, and when I started my tenure track position, I had far more experience than most, which ended up being very helpful.

My career has made my family overly aware of issues surrounding gender equity in the workplace. I've shown my family the data that shows that women faculty at my institution have salaries lower than their male counterparts. My daughters will go into the workforce with their eyes far more open than mine were. I think that when my husband had to deal with my lack of maternity benefits at NC State along with the negative words and actions by my supervisor, it made him keenly aware of the difficulties women scientists face in the workforce. As a group leader and manager of research scientists, he makes sure that the women he supervises receive positive support from him during their pregnancies and that they feel comfortable when issues arise with raising small children. My daughters see the long hours I've had to work over the years. They get pretty annoyed when folks outside of academia make remarks insinuating that I have less than a forty-hour work week. They've dealt with the nights and weekends I've spent grading, planning, going in to work to get projects finished, or traveling for work. I hope they realize that my accomplishments have only been possible because their father has been willing to cook, clean, and do anything else he could to help me along the way.

2. Did you have role models? Which examples were set for you in your childhood or while you were growing up?

My role models were my parents and my teachers. My mom didn't go to work until I was in either fifth or sixth grade. I was the youngest of three, so my brother was already in college and my sister was in high school when she went back to work as a nurse. My dad worked two jobs my whole life. They were both incredibly hard working and made sure my siblings and I had everything we needed. I had some terrific teachers in high school who went above and beyond to make school interesting, fun, and challenging.

3. Have you come up against any significant obstacles during your career and how did you overcome these?

My biggest obstacle was the continual year-to-year contracts as a non-tenure-track faculty member and the feeling of being marginalized at work. It's hard to ask for maternity leave (which was nonexistent for me) when you're worried that your contract might not be renewed if you ask for too much. It's also hard to see others get hired in as tenure-track assistant professors in other departments and progress in their discipline, while you're doing the same work and staying at the

visiting assistant professor level, with no voice on campus. I made sure I let my department chair know that I wanted more responsibility and that I wanted to be tenure track. This served me well, because I was given advisees (not usually done), I offered to serve on college-wide committees and was placed on a high-profile committee while still a contingent faculty member. I was able to position myself well when it came to applying for the tenure-track job that opened in my department.

4. Is there anything you would have done differently or would not do again?

Wow. Tough question. I would have worked more efficiently in graduate school. I spent way too much time teaching, tutoring, being a supplemental instruction leader (and then running the program at NC State), and a host of other things rather than staying focused on getting my research finished. In retrospect, I would have done the Ph.D. straight away without stopping for the M.S. and saved a few years too.

5. What advice would you give to young women hoping to pursue a career in academia? E.g., while studying, when planning a family

My advice is to do what you love, do what's right for you, and have confidence. I had two miscarriages along the way and we've dealt with three bouts of layoffs for my husband. It's been tough on our family, but working at a small liberal arts college is invigorating. I have great colleagues who are willing to let me experiment in my classroom and in the lab. I cannot give advice to women who want to become professors at large research institutions, but my path has been right for me. Each institution where I've worked has taught me something about myself and about academia. It is easy to get frustrated when things aren't going as you think they should, but everyone deals with times that are difficult.

Main Steps in Gail's Career

Education and Professional Career

1987	B.S. Chemistry Education, Virginia Commonwealth University, VA
1994	Ph.D. Chemistry, North Carolina State University, NC
1994–1996	Chemistry Instructor, North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics, Durham, NC
1996–1998	Lecturer and Visiting Assistant Professor, North Carolina State University, NC
1999–2000	Assistant Professor, University of the Sciences in Philadelphia, PA
2003–2007	Visiting Assistant Professor, Guilford College, NC
2007–2010	Assistant Professor, Guilford College, NC
2010– present	Associate Professor, Guilford College, NC