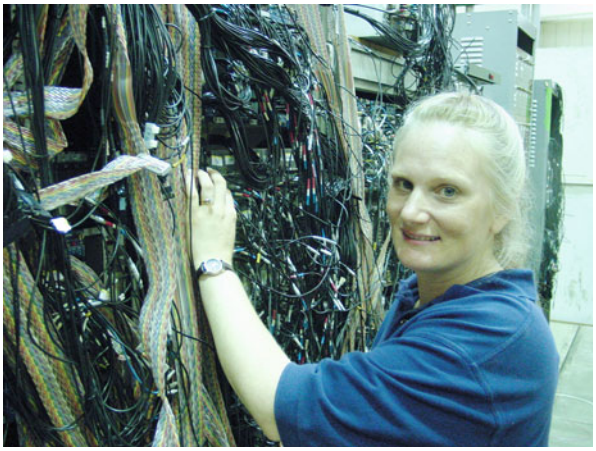
Remarkable, Delightful, Awesome: It Will Change Your Life, Not Overnight but Over Time

Sherry J. Yennello



She's remarkable! I said that when she was born and many times since. Stephanie was born with ten perfect little fingers and ten perfect little toes. She came out crying and all I wanted to do was soothe her and take away whatever was causing her to cry, but the nurse told me it was good for her lungs. Thus began a remarkable journey that has changed my life.

Growing Up

Let me step back to my own childhood. I had magnificent parents and two older sisters. My mother earned a college degree, but, like many of her generation, she stopped working when my oldest sister came along. My father dropped out of school in the 6th grade to join the Merchant Marines. When my sisters and I were still quite young, he went to night school to get his GED. He didn't go back to school for career advancement; he did so to send a message to us about the

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importance of an education. There was never a question of whether any of his daughters would go to college, just a question of where. When my time came, I went to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. I got dual degrees in chemistry and physics. My father always enjoyed parents' weekend, because although he had little formal education, he appreciated all the engineering demos that were always on display. My father was—and is—a very smart man.

While going through college I didn't really have a plan for my future. In fact it wasn't until the summer after I graduated, while working at a nuclear power plant and getting ready to go to Indiana University for graduate school, that I realized I wasn't going to live the life of my mother. I was sitting by the locks in Fulton, NY, recalling a conversation I had the previous year with a friend from high school. We were talking about our futures. Even though I had worked hard through college, I said I would give it all up for the right guy—after all, that is what my mother did. My friend told me "for the right guy, you won't have to give it all up."

The Right Partner

After graduate school and a postdoc at the National Superconducting Cyclotron Laboratory at Michigan State University, I accepted a position as an Assistant Professor of Chemistry at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas. My career as an experimental nuclear chemist was starting, and I was very excited. And. . .I met the "right guy." Larry was also a young faculty member in the chemistry department. He was—and is—a guy for whom I would give it all up, but for whom I don't have to. He has been tremendously supportive of my career, sometimes at the expense of his own. He has been there at every step; he went to every doctor's appointment when we were pregnant.

The Decision

In my mind, being an assistant professor and an experimental nuclear chemist presented a huge obstacle to becoming a parent. How would I balance my career and a family? How would I avoid the radiation area where I do my experiments for a nine-month pregnancy? I had great career role models in two senior nuclear scientists Ani and Jolie, but neither of them had kids. Two amazing women helped me see that being a parent and being a scholar are not mutually exclusive. Shirley Jackson, then president of my alma mater, visited my campus as part of a Women in Discovery symposium. While escorting her from one meeting to another she explained to me that I could do an experiment without being in the radiation area as long as I had a group of people with whom to work. Additionally, Geri Richmond visited campus and also provided great encouragement about being a mother and an academic. She assured me it could be done, as long as I was willing to ask for help.

These two incredible women probably don't even know how much they impacted my decision to become a mother. Now I just had to figure out the best time.

Timing

We had been married for about five years and my tenure had been granted when our department made the offer to let faculty double teach—something previously much frowned upon—under certain special conditions. They were trying to get more of the tenured and tenure-track faculty into the larger service courses, because it looks better to uninformed people who don't appreciate the talent that exists in the non-tenure line faculty. So they offered to let any tenured or tenure-track faculty member have a semester off in return for teaching a larger service course in addition to a regular teaching assignment. They assumed that this would enable the faculty member to have an uninterrupted semester devoted to research. When I took the deal, the associate head assumed that this would just mean we wouldn't schedule nuclear chemistry (a small upper division course I taught once a year) the upcoming fall. I said no and that I wanted the following spring semester off. He queried "Why?" and I told him because that was what I wanted. How could I tell him I wanted to have a kid when I hadn't even discussed it with my husband yet?

So I think I shocked my husband when, over dinner at a favorite local restaurant, I asked him if we wanted to have a child. The timing was perfect; I had tenure and I had arranged a semester off. Fortunately for all of us, he agreed and we made a decision that would change our lives. We knew I would have the spring semester off, so we calculated backwards and decided when we should start trying to get pregnant.

Pregnancy

Biology was good to us and our child was scheduled to arrive just after finals in December. When Larry and I were in San Francisco for an ACS meeting I had a suspicion that we might be on our way to becoming parents, but it was too early to tell for sure. Nonetheless, despite a very nice dinner at a very nice restaurant, I passed on the wine—just in case. I didn't want to do anything that wasn't in the best interest of my future child. Additionally I gave up Twizzlers and all other junk food and ate fruit for snacks for the next nine months. Nothing but the best for my future child.

When we first knew I was pregnant, Larry was ready to tell the world. I wasn't ready to let the people in our department know, however. There were very few women among the tenured or tenure-track faculty, and none with kids. So we told our families, but otherwise kept our news to ourselves for a number of months. I was being creative about how to avoid the radiation area, but I finally had to break

my silence and tell the cyclotron laboratory director because a congressman was visiting campus as part of a science and public policy program and he wanted a tour. I had been sitting near him at lunch and did what I almost always do with people I meet, which is tell them they should come see the cyclotron. I knew his day was crammed and he wouldn't have time for the tour, so I didn't think anything about my offer. But by the time I walked back across campus there was a phone message that his schedule had been rearranged and he was headed over for a tour. I panicked. How could I go into a radiation area to give a tour? How could I get someone else to give the tour? How could I tell the Congressman that I couldn't give him the tour? So I settled on asking the cyclotron director to give him the tour; his status made it seem OK that he was to give the tour I had offered. But the price was I had to break my silence. The director promptly told his wife, and I learned that even solemnly sworn secrets come with a spousal exception. Fortunately it was still a number of months before my pregnancy became known in the department.

Although both Larry and I believe that information is good, sometimes too much information isn't a good thing. Since we were older parents we opted to have an amniocentesis. We consulted with a neonatal specialist, who said you really shouldn't do the amnio until 16 weeks, but she did a sonogram to see if there was any reason for concern. The nuchal translucency she measured put us at a slightly higher risk of complications. I went insane. This rational scientist who spends a lot of time looking for small signals and understanding probabilities couldn't be rational. This was my future child. I needed to be certain that she was perfect. Larry convinced the doctor to do the amnio a week or so early, and we were very happy when the news arrived that we had a perfectly normal daughter on the way.

Having told my research group that I was pregnant, I would go in the cave to help set up the experiment, but once we had beam I would confine my involvement to the counting room. My next challenge was that I was teaching the nuclear chemistry course in the fall (part of the condition for getting the spring off). Part of the course was a laboratory where we used radioactive sources. The exposure would be minimal, but I didn't want to risk the health of my child in any way. It seemed reasonable that I could teach the lab without actually being in there when the sources were being used. In order to do this, I would need a little extra help from a graduate student. I asked the department head for 1/3 of an extra teaching assistant so I could replace my physical presence during the lab with the graduate student who had taught the course with me the previous fall. Fortunately, the department head agreed.

Graduate student assistance in my nuclear chemistry lab was the only accommodation for my pregnancy that I asked for from the department—I had already "bought" my semester of teaching relief. However, I was contacted by the HR liaison in the department to inform me about my right to take time off under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). (She hadn't felt the need to inform any of the male faculty who had recently had children.) She instructed me to get a doctor's note so I could use six weeks of sick leave until I had to invoke FMLA. I explained that my child wasn't due to arrive until after finals and I had arranged to have teaching relief for the following semester so while I appreciated her advice I didn't

think I needed to invoke any of it. She took a calendar and informed me that faculty and staff were supposed to work until the 22nd of December. I assured her that there would not be a day in which she could find 50 % of my faculty colleagues in their offices that I would not be accounted for. When I asked if she had done this briefing with my male colleagues who recently had kids she told me she was just treating me like "any other pregnant female in the department." The problem was that her mental model for a pregnant female was a staff person for whom she would hire a temporary replacement while they were on maternity leave. My problem was I wasn't sure where she thought she could find a temporary replacement to run my research group. She followed up our meeting with a memo to me repeating all her instructions about getting a doctor's note and invoking FMLA. After calming down (Larry was very helpful here) I wrote the department head an e-mail saying I hadn't asked for any leave, but I would let him know if at a later date I thought I needed to take leave. He must have asked her to step back because that was the last discussion I had with her about maternity leave.

While I was pregnant I was informed that I had been selected as the Sigma Xi National Young Investigator, but I would have to accept the award in person in Albuquerque and give a talk at the national meeting. The meeting was scheduled one month before I was due. I accepted and Larry made plans to travel with me to the meeting in case I needed any help. My health insurance plan prohibited travel outside of a 90-mile range in the last month of pregnancy, and my award talk was just outside that window. But about a month before the meeting my OB said she thought my daughter would arrive about a week earlier than the original due date. Fortunately I convinced her not to move my "official" due date so I could accept the award. Larry was fabulous and even found a suit for his very pregnant wife to give a talk in.

My Daughter

Stephanie did arrive "early" as predicted and was born with jaundice. Fortunately, my last lecture had been given and my exam had already been written and printed. I called my teaching assistant who agreed to do the review for the final and give the exam. She would later deliver the final exams to my house so I could grade them. Stephanie spent the first 5 days of her life in the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit under special lights to treat her jaundice. I took a week of sick leave. My parents, excited about their first (and still only) grandchild, flew in on the red-eye. They were amazing as they took care of Larry and I. We spent those first days driving back and forth to the hospital for feedings. Fortunately, Stephanie was able to come home before my parents had to leave.

The first weeks after Stephanie was born were eventful. Not only were we dealing with this new life, but my first Ph.D. student, Doug, was set to walk the stage at graduation. Stephanie stayed home with her dad, but she gave me the perfect reason to leave the ceremony shortly after I had presented Doug with the

hood symbolizing his degree. The following week, Larry and I had a faculty meeting to attend and we took Stephanie with us. The associate head was caught off guard. He said he didn't know that I was coming back to work—as if having a child meant the end of my career. It didn't mean the end of my career, but it did mean we needed to get some help.

Childcare

At first Larry and I thought that we might be able to arrange our schedules such that we could alternate who was home to take care of Stephi—particularly since I had a semester of teaching relief. It quickly became clear that our plan wouldn't work, regardless of a newly upgraded computer at home. So we made a plan for how one might go about finding a solution to our dilemma. Not a list of possible solutions, but a list of steps we could take that might lead to a solution. One of the first steps was to ask some of our friends who had young kids how they dealt with the childcare issue. We were told about this wonderful nanny, Dorothy, who had previously been employed at a childcare center in town, but then went on to be a nanny in Houston. Now she was coming back to town so we got her contact info and arranged to meet her. Within 5 minutes we knew she would be perfect. Dorothy took care of Stephanie for the next eight months, which gave us just enough time to get our bearings before the next chapter of our lives started.

When Stephanie was 8 months old, we moved to Washington, DC, to work for the National Science Foundation (NSF) for 1 year. We spent 3 days driving to Arlington, Virginia. When we arrived, we put Stephi in group care for the first time. Bright Horizons, a childcare center, was on the first floor of the NSF building. Luckily a wonderful staff member at NSF, Denise, had connected me with the center, and we got on the waiting list months before we moved. Since the NSF had priority at the center, we were able to actually get Stephi a spot. We cried a lot those first times we dropped her off. The worst day was when I had to go back to College Station for an experiment the week after we moved. I flew back to Texas leaving my beautiful eight-month-old daughter in a world that had been turned upside down. The only familiarity for her was her dad, thus starting an incredible bonding between the two of them. She could only fall asleep curled up on his chest for the next year. Returning to Texas for that experiment is a decision that I would make differently if I could roll back the calendar because it took over a year for Stephi to forgive me for leaving so early on.

My sisters thought that one of the biggest changes we would have to go through with a baby was giving up going to nice restaurants, which was something Larry and I certainly enjoyed. However in October, when Stephi was ten months old, we ended up in Hawaii and had to figure out how to feed her in a restaurant. After this went well, and we were back in DC, we proceeded to take her to all the top restaurants in DC. Many a waiter marveled at what the baby would eat. Some

years later she became quite picky about what she would eat, but just this year she has become a vegetarian and is a most adventurous eater once again.

As the year went on, and I took trips back to College Station to run more experiments, I started checking out childcare centers again so we would be set when we returned to Texas. This was when I realized I needed a lot longer than I thought to get into a childcare center—you were supposed to get on the waiting list before you were pregnant if you wanted a spot before the child was two. Fortunately, we were able to get Stephanie into the TAMU children's center.

Travel

At seven weeks old Stephi took her first airplane flight. Larry and I had a meeting to attend at Michigan State University. We had a friend there who arranged for someone to help look after her while we worked, and I was able to find an empty classroom in which I could pump. It was not much longer after that trip that I traveled alone to give a talk at Arkansas State University. I lacked the confidence to ask for time and space to pump, so I ended up sitting on the floor of a bathroom.

When Stephi was four months old there was an American Chemical Society meeting in San Diego, and both Larry and I were scheduled to go. We had decided I would fly to my parent's home in Oregon with Stephi and spend a few days so everyone could get acclimated with one another. Then I would fly down to California to meet Larry. Larry was very sad the night Stephi and I left for the airport. He was about to face his first night without his daughter since we brought her home from the hospital. When my parents dropped me off at the Portland airport a few days later, I was equally sad since I was leaving her, too. I took a picture of her and left in tears. As soon as I landed in California I sought out a 1-hour photo developer (we weren't yet in the digital age). We had that picture—if not our daughter—for the next few days. At the end of the meeting we both flew to Portland and couldn't have been happier to have her back in our arms. We made the decision then never to go to the same meeting without taking her with us. Now when we both go to the same conference, we creatively merge our schedules and we arrange to spend time with her, too. We just needed to coordinate our schedules. Communication and coordination are important every day. I don't agree to meetings before 8 or after 5 and never accept a travel invitation without discussing it with Larry. Twelve years later I'm still sad every time I head to the airport without her.

As Stephanie grew older it became more important that she knew ahead of time that one of us was going to be traveling. I would sing a refrain to her many times:

Mommy will always come back,
Mommy will always come back.
Mommy loves you very much and
Mommy will always come back.

I also left her notes to find while I was gone. Eventually, Stephi played a game where she would walk around the house pulling her small suitcase and say she was going on a business trip. She said she would call when she got to the hotel. The hotel was under the dining room table.

Professional travel is something that is always a balancing act. I travel less than I would without her and feel more guilty when I do travel. For her first birthday I was supposed to be at a meeting in Bologna. I don't know what I was thinking when I agreed to the trip and booked the plane tickets. But while I was there I realized what a mistake I was about to make, so I switched my plane tickets and came home early. In later years I was smart enough—and comfortable enough—to just say no to trips that conflicted with her birthday. I've also taken red-eye flights home from meetings on the west coast so that I could make it to her soccer game the next morning in Houston. I have scheduled flights to be after her games—in one case getting to the airport in just enough time to take a shower since I was on an overnight flight to Europe (and I needed to get rid of the sweat and sunscreen). My travel planning always involves several questions. Do I need to go? What is the last flight I can take and get there on time? What is the first flight I can take to get home after I have done what I needed to do? Sometimes I Skype into meetings rather than travel. Regardless I am always sad when I head to the airport. I love my daughter and don't want to miss a single day of her life.

Advice in a Nutshell. . .

- Find a supportive partner or other support network. My husband is wonderful.
- Know your environment, or more importantly choose one that is going to be supportive. That could mean picking your thesis advisor or postdoctoral mentor. It definitely means carefully picking a department that is going to help you reach your goals.
- Timing is everything. There may never be a perfect time unless you create it.
- When you get to choose who you work with, choose wisely.
- Communication is critical. Don't assume that your partner, your child, your students, or your colleagues know what you are thinking or planning.
- If you make a decision you can't live with, unmake it.
- Be creative about travel. Do you need to go? Can you Skype in rather than attend in person?

She Has Changed My Life

My daughter is delightful. She is 13 now. I have had the privilege of watching her grow and learn and watching her tackle new challenges and become the most amazing person I know. I often wonder how she got to be so awesome. I could

not imagine life without Stephanie. I try every day to appreciate the gift that is my daughter.

Main Steps in Sherry's Career

Dr. Sherry J. Yennello, Regents Professor of Chemistry, Director of the Cyclotron Institute and holder of the Bright Chair in Nuclear Science at Texas A&M University, is an internationally renowned nuclear chemist. Sherry joined the Texas A&M faculty in 1993 after serving as a postdoctoral fellow at Michigan State University (1991–1992) and earning her Ph.D. from Indiana University in 1990. She was architect and cochair of an NSF-funded Gender Equity Conversation effort and served for many years as the chair of the College of Science Diversity Committee. Sherry is a fellow of the American Chemical Society (2011), the American Physical Society (2005), and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (2013). Her many awards include the ACS's Francis P. Garvan-John M. Olin Medal (2011), the Texas A&M Women's Faculty Network Outstanding Mentor Award (2010), the NSF Young Investigator Award (1994), and the General Electric Faculty for the Future Award (1993).