CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

MICHAEL A. FARRAR

The Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences

Transcript of Interviews
Conducted by

David J. Caruso

at

University of Minnesota
Minneapolis, Minnesota

on

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(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

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Oral History Program
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Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19106

MICHAEL A. FARRAR

1964 Born in Washington, D.C. on 5 May

Education

1987 B.S., University of Wisconsin, Madison, Molecular Biology
1993 Ph.D., Washington University School of Medicine, Immunology

Professional Experience

University of Washington, Seattle
1993-1997 Postdoctorate, Immunology under Roger M. Perlmutter

Merck Research Labs, Rahway, New Jersey
1997-2000 Postdoctorate, Immunology under Roger M. Perlmutter

University of Minnesota, Minneapolis
2000-2006 Assistant Professor, Center for Immunology, The Cancer Center, and Department of Laboratory Medicine and Pathology
2006-present Associate Professor, Center for Immunology, The Cancer Center, and Department of Laboratory Medicine and Pathology

Honors

1982-1983 Kemper K. Knapp Scholarship
1986 Phi Beta Kappa
1992-1993 Spencer T. and Ann W. Olin Medical Scientist Fellowship
1995-1997 Rudolf Montgelas Cancer Research Institute Postdoctoral Fellowship
2002-2006 Pew Scholar in the Biomedical Sciences
2004-2008 Cancer Research Institute Investigator Award
2006 AAI Junior Faculty Travel Award
2007-2012 Leukemia and Lymphoma Society Scholar Award

ABSTRACT

Michael A. Farrar was born in Washington, D.C., where his father was a chemist for the Bureau of Standards. Farrar's mother, a housewife, was German, and Farrar and his younger brother and sister grew up bilingual. As his father changed jobs, the family moved near to New York City, back to the D.C. area, and finally to Madison, Wisconsin, where the senior Farrar joined the faculty of the University of Wisconsin. By that time Farrar had begun high school. He liked to read and was interested in physics and astronomy, but not so much in biology. He crewed for his high school team and continued rowing throughout college.

Thinking of becoming an astrophysicist, Farrar entered the University of Wisconsin, intending to major in physics and mathematics. At the end of his junior year he attended some lectures given by Oliver Smithies and found them fascinating. In general, he found biology better taught and more interesting at the university, and so he changed his major to biology; during the summers he worked in a chicken lab trying to manipulate genes. Having started the biology program later in his undergraduate career, he decided to stay for a fifth year to complete a senior thesis. During his last semester he was diagnosed with Addison's disease.

Farrar decided to attend Washington University in St. Louis for a PhD in immunology. There he began work on interferon receptors in Robert Schreiber's lab; he won the Olin Medical Scientist Foundation Fellowship. He also took up bicycle racing. Taking advice from Schreiber and a number of others, Farrar accepted a postdoc at the University of Washington, working in Roger Perlmutter's lab on Ras signaling and B-cells, as well as developing a novel, chemical-induced dimerization system. He enjoyed new outdoor activities in Seattle, Washington, and continued biking as well.

After Farrar had been in Seattle for about four years, Perlmutter moved to Merck and Company, taking most of his lab, including Farrar, with him. There Farrar was able to design his own lab, to interview and recommend for hire the lab staff and technicians, and to buy whatever equipment he wanted. He learned a great deal about setting up and managing a lab from this experience. He was able to continue his previous work there too, but he had to find new athletic activities, this time rock climbing and ballroom dancing. He also met his future wife, a medical student at Albert Einstein College of Medicine. When it was time to look for a job Farrar had an offer from the University of Minnesota, and his wife was able to transfer her residency.

At the end of the interview Farrar discusses his continuing work on STAT; the politics of publishing; ethics in science; the increase in administrative duties, with its corresponding decrease in time for bench work; grants in general; the Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences award in particular (and its annual meetings); recruiting students and getting his lab going; and patents. He describes how he tries to balance work life with spending time with his two children and his wife. He concludes his interview by discussing his newest work and its implications for human leukemia.

INTERVIEWER

David J. Caruso earned a B.A. in the History of Science, Medicine, and Technology from the Johns Hopkins University in 2001 and a Ph.D. in Science and Technology Studies

from Cornell University in 2008. His graduate work focused on the interaction of American military and medical personnel from the Spanish-American War through World War I and the institutional transformations that resulted in the development of American military medicine as a unique form of knowledge and practice. David is currently the Program Manager for Oral History at the CHF. His current research interest focuses on the discipline formation of biomedical science in 20th-century America and the organizational structures that have contributed to such formation.

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