CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

# ALISON A. WEISS

The Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences

Transcript of an Interview
Conducted by

Robert Kohler and Naomi Morrissette

at

Coronado, California

on

3 March 1991

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This oral history is part of a series supported by a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts based on the Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences. This collection is an important resource for the history of biomedicine, recording the life and careers of young, distinguished biomedical scientists and of Pew Biomedical Scholar Advisory Committee members.

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**ALISON A. WEISS**

| | |
|---|---|
| 1952 | Born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 22 December |

## Education

| | |
|---|---|
| 1975 | AB, Biology, Washington University in St. Louis |
| 1981 | MS, Microbiology, University of Washington |
| 1983 | PhD, Medical Microbiology, Stanford University |

## Professional Experience

| | |
|---|---|
| | University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia |
| 1983-1985 | Postdoctoral Fellow |
| | Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia |
| 1985-present | Assistant Professor |

## Honors

| | |
|---|---|
| 1980 | American Society for Microbiology, Presidents Fellowship |
| 1981, 1983 | NIH Predoctoral Fellowship, Stanford University |
| 1984-1985 | Damon Runyon-Walter Winchell Cancer Fellowship |
| 1987 | Pew Scholars in the Biomedical Sciences Award |

## ABSTRACT

**Alison A. Weiss** grew up in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, a suburb of Milwaukee, the second of six children. Her father was an electrician, her mother a housewife. All six children graduated from college, and four have postgraduate education. Alison has always liked science and math and has always done well in them.

Because of campus chaos at the University of Wisconsin, Weiss chose to attend Washington University in St. Louis, where she worked on bacteria in Simon Silver's lab. She enjoyed the University, Silver's lab, her independence, and the work, ultimately staying on as a technician for a three years. Weiss began graduate school in Stanley Falkow's lab at the University of Washington; soon thereafter the lab moved to Stanford University. Weiss chose to work in pathogenic bacteria because she liked microbiology and wanted find a way to use it to help prevent disease. Her dissertation dealt with *Bordetella pertussis*, and she cloned a pertussis toxin, partly as a result of a short stint with Douglas Berg who taught her a great deal of genetics and a different way of looking at things.

After two years as a postdoc at University of Virginia (UVA) Weiss and her husband were recruited to UVA's medical school, Virginia Commonwealth University. Weiss received a good setup package and gradually built up her lab. She keeps her lab somewhat small so that she can keep up with the extensive literature. Her main focus is trying to figure out not just what pathogens do, but why and how. She says that even diphtheria, the simplest disease, is still not understood, and pertussis is much more complicated.

Weiss loves bench work and works at balancing it with her family life. She discusses the funding situation, peer review, and the time and effort one must devote to study sections. Asked about her ten-year plan, she says she is lucky or unlucky enough to have realized all her goals so far, but she suggests she might like to do field work, hoping to improve human health. Weiss explains how the Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences money helped her. She ends her interview by describing the personality needed to be a scientist, saying science is an exciting, creative, and rewarding career for someone with patience.

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