

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

**SUSAN J. BIRREN**

The Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences

Transcript of an Interview  
Conducted by

William Van Benschoten

at

Brandeis University  
Waltham, Massachusetts

on

2, 3, and 4 August 2004

From the Original Collection of the University of California, Los Angeles

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**REFORMATTING:**

Kim Phan, Program Intern, Oral History, Chemical Heritage Foundation. B.A. expected 2011, Anthropology, Cornell University.

David J. Caruso, Program Manager, Oral History, Chemical Heritage Foundation. B.A., History of Science, Medicine, and Technology, Johns Hopkins University; PhD., Science and Technology Studies, Cornell University.

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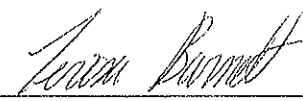
Department of Biology, M/S 008, Brandeis University, 415 South Street  
Waltham, Massachusetts 02454  
(Address)

781.736.2680  
(Phone Number)

barren@brandeis.edu  
(E-mail Address)

x 8/2/04  
(Date)

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(Director, UCLA Oral History Program)

10/8/04  
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## **SUSAN J. BIRREN**

1958 Born on 24 November, in Freeport, New York

### Education

1980 A.B. with distinction, Biochemistry, University of California, Berkeley  
1987 Ph.D., Biological Chemistry, University of California, Los Angeles

### Professional Experience

1987-1993 California Institute of Technology  
Postdoctoral Fellow

1997-1998 Marine Biological Laboratories, Woods Hole, Massachusetts  
Instructor, Summer Neurobiology Course

2002-2005 Society for Neuroscience Committee for Women in Neuroscience

2002 The Medical Foundation, Scientific Advisory Committee

2004 National Institute of Heart, Lung, and Blood  
Ad-Hoc Reviewer

Present Volen National Center for Complex Systems  
Member

Present Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts  
Associate Professor, Department of Biology

### Honors

1982-1986 USPHS/NRSA Predoctoral Trainee  
1986-1987 Associated Western Universities Laboratory Research Award,  
California Institute of Technology  
1987-1990 Damon Runyon-Walter Winchell Cancer Research Fund post-doctoral  
Fellowship, Brandeis University  
1994 American Heart Association, Massachusetts Affiliate, Beginning-Grant-  
In-Aid  
1996 Whitehall Foundation Research Award

1996 Pew Scholars Award  
2000 Alberta Gotthardt and Henry Strage Award for Aspiring Young Science Faculty

### Selected Publications

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## ABSTRACT

**Susan J. Birren** spent time in New York and Washington, D.C., though grew up mostly in Kentfield, California, just north of San Francisco, the second youngest of four siblings. Her father was a lawyer, and then an administrative law judge, for the National Labor Relations Board; her mother studied art and worked as a designer in the garment industry until she had children, after which she became a professional artist. Her family did much together—camping, sailing, hiking, and general playing—and Birren was an avid reader and enjoyed exploring nature. Academics came easily and she had a clear interest in science and mathematics throughout her early schooling; a female chemistry teacher in high school, with a master's degree, proved somewhat influential.

Birren applied to two schools only for college and undertook her undergraduate career at the University of California, Berkeley. Initially interested in studying mathematics, she decided to switch to biochemistry for her major and had the opportunity to work with Edward E. Penhoet, who later became one of the founders of Chiron Corporation. She worked on isolating opsins from a halobacterium, a high-salt bacterium, but, more importantly, she fell in love with lab life and lab culture and benefitted from being mentored by Penhoet. From Berkeley she moved on to the University of California, Los Angeles working with Harvey R. Hirschman on the transcriptional regulation of the metallothionein gene; while there, Kathryn L. Calame also served as a mentor. Birren decided to remain in California for her postdoctoral work, moving into the lab of David J. Anderson at the California Institute of Technology, studying the differentiation of neural crest cells. From there she went on to a faculty position at Brandeis University looking at the functional development of neurons.

During the interview Birren was candid about being a working mother and dealing with a chronic medical condition. At the end of the interview she discusses gender issues in science; administrative duties; the grant-writing process; balancing career and family; the issue of patents; creativity in science; and the role of serendipity in her work. The interview concludes with thoughts on teaching the history of science; the process of conducting scientific research; setting the national scientific agenda; the role of the scientist in educating the public; and the role of the Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences on her work.

## UCLA INTERVIEW HISTORY

### INTERVIEWER:

William Van Benschoten, Interviewer, UCLA Oral History Program. B.A., History, University of California, Riverside; M.A., History, University of California, Riverside; C. Phil., History, UCLA

### TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

**Place:** Birren's office, Brandeis University.

**Dates, length of sessions:** August 2, 2004; August 3, 2004; August 4, 2004

**Total number of recorded hours:** 6

**Persons present during interview:** Birren and Van Benschoten.

### CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

This interview is one in a series with Pew Scholars in the Biomedical Sciences conducted by the UCLA Oral History Program in conjunction with the Pew Charitable Trusts's Pew Scholars in the Biomedical Sciences Oral History and Archives Project. The project has been designed to document the backgrounds, education, and research of biomedical scientists awarded four-year Pew scholarships since 1988.

To provide an overall framework for project interviews, the director of the UCLA Oral History Program and three UCLA faculty project consultants developed a topic outline. In preparing for this interview, Van Benschoten held a telephone preinterview conversation with Birren to obtain written background information (curriculum vitae, copies of published articles, etc.) and agree on an interviewing schedule. He also reviewed documentation in Birren's file at the Pew Scholars Program office in San Francisco, including Birren's proposal application, letters of recommendation, and reviews by Pew Scholars Program national advisory committee members.

### ORIGINAL EDITING:

Carol Squires edited the interview. She checked the verbatim transcript of the interview against the original tape recordings, edited for punctuation, paragraphing, and spelling, and verified proper names. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed.

Birren reviewed the transcript. She verified proper names and made a minor number of corrections and additions.

Carol Squires prepared the table of contents and TechniType Transcripts compiled the guide to proper names.

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