TURNING POINT
Refugee role model

Plant biologist Tien Huynh, a refugee from Vietnam, channelled her love of plants into researching conservation of critically endangered species in Australia. She then moved on to looking at cancer-fighting compounds in Asian plants at RMIT University in Melbourne. This year, she was named a 'Superstar of STEM', a programme run by Science & Technology Australia to recognize successful women and foster their skills as mentors.

KIM STEVENSON

Describe your arrival in Australia.
I came to Australia with my mother and sister to join my father when I was six years old, after he had been exiled from Vietnam for his role as an officer in the South Vietnamese army. I did not speak English and had no money and no friends. Everything was completely different. But my parents came from a culture that had a huge respect for education and encouraged my siblings and me to study hard and contribute to the community.

How did your love of plants shape your career?
I was keen on plants before I could even talk. I followed up that passion during my undergraduate degree in biology at RMIT University. Ann Lawrie, an applied biologist, took me under her wing. When I received a scholarship to do an honours degree in plant conservation, I worked with Lawrie and Cassandra McLean, a plant biologist at the University of Melbourne. I did my PhD at the University of Melbourne on conservation of critically endangered orchids, which took me to Kew Gardens near London.

Did you do a postdoc?
I did five between 2004 and 2008. I kept saying yes to chances to study something new. I started off at Kew Gardens, continuing to work on orchids. Then I went to the University of Naples Federico II in Italy to study orchid pheromones and fragrances. But I missed Australia and returned home. My uncle, manager of a US biotechnology company, suggested that I explore cancer research. By that time, McLean had developed cancer so I had personal motivation to follow that course. I then landed a postdoc at RMIT doing skin-cancer research. I loved it, but was soon poached to do neuropharmacology research, only to be nabbed to design pharmaceuticals. It sounds like I jumped here and there, but every project was meaningful and helped me to secure a wide range of skills in many disciplines.

Did you ever struggle with self-doubt?
At the beginning of each postdoc, I would compare myself to people who had been doing that work for much longer and would question whether I belonged. But I realized that I brought experiences they didn't have.

What drew you to medicinal properties of Asian plants?
I considered my background a strength and decided to explore plants from my native region. When I go back to Vietnam, I visit markets to find local plants and foods. In 2009, I saw this bright-orange fruit called red gac (*Momordica cochinchinensis*). The locals said that it was quite good for you, and I wondered if it could fight cancer, so I brought some back to Australia. We found that the seeds of the plant not only killed up to 95% of melanoma cells, but also contain the highest level of β-carotene and lycopene — food pigments with cancer-fighting properties — of any plant on Earth. I'm also exploring the health benefits of several other Asian plants.

When did you start your own lab?
Lawrie suggested in 2008 that I start teaching. I decided to give it a trial year and realized I have this passion that I was able to convey to students. So that started me here at RMIT and I developed my research lab in 2012.

Are women-focused science awards important?
Yes. Women are so under-represented in the sciences. Young girls who want to be scientists don't have very visible role models. I was lucky to have female role models my whole life. I want to do that for others. ■

INTERVIEW BY VIRGINIA GEWIN

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

GENDER BIAS

Introduction bias

Female US academic physicians are introduced as 'doctor' by male counterparts less often than are their male peers, and much less often than when introduced by female peers, a study finds (J. A. Files *et al. J. Womens Health* **26,** 413–419; 2017). Physician Julia Files at Mayo Clinic in Scottsdale, Arizona, and her colleagues examined 321 video archives of talks made at two weekly medical meeting series between 2012 and 2014. All of the introducers and speakers had MD, PhD or MD-PhD degrees. The authors found that when men introduced women, they called her 'doctor' 49% of the time. They used the title 72% for men. Women used the title during 96% of their introductions, irrespective of gender; men used it 66% of the time. The authors warn that men's failure to use professional titles for women reinforces the perception that men are of higher status than women. "Women may benefit more from an external conferral of status through a title than men," the authors say. "Women may suffer a greater loss of status when that title is withheld." Such introductions may amplify the sense of marginalization and professional discomfort that female academic physicians have expressed, the authors say.

GENDER EQUITY

Help stop harassment

A US geographer is partnering with geoscientists and scientific societies to provide training for those in the Earth, space and environmental sciences in how bystanders can halt sexual harassment. The effort aims to improve gender equity and the work climate in the geosciences by training university administrators and faculty members in how best to address, prevent and eliminate sexual harassment (see go.nature.com/2x3g1db). Project lead Erika Marín-Spiotta, a geographer at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, says that the team will hold workshops at US campuses and for professional societies, including the Society for Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics and Native Americans and the American Geophysical Union. Intervention training for researchers, which will source input from those who face harassment on the basis of race or gender identity, is necessary, because harassment often happens in the field. The project is funded by a US$1.1-million, 4-year US National Science Foundation grant. "We plan to come up with a model that other disciplines can use, apply or modify as needed," says Marín-Spiotta.