



Find and follow your passion

The greatest discoveries in science often come from unexpected findings based on curiosity and passion, rather than a precise plan. The same is true of our careers.

Credit: Hedda Wardemann

Over the years, I have had many discussions with young scientists in Germany about their career options. Female researchers in particular often ask how I planned my career to get where I am. My answer: I did not plan anything. I liked what I was doing, and I was fortunate to have great support from people who believed in me. As a graduate student, *Forschen auf Deutsch*¹ was a must-read book. The tone of the book suggested that it was almost impossible to have a successful career as a researcher in Germany. The way to increase your chances was to join one of the highly competitive labs in the United States, where at least two postdocs would work on the same project. Despite these rumors, I decided to give it a try. If I did not like it, the plan was to change my career path and maybe become a patent lawyer.

The only interview that I could get was with Michel Nussenzweig at The Rockefeller University in New York. I had a good feeling after visiting the lab. I loved the city and was very happy when I got the offer. There was no way for me to predict the long-term impact of my decision to accept it. By serendipity, I ended up working with Eric Meffre on understanding, at the single-cell level, how self-tolerance is established during human B cell development to avoid autoimmunity. To address this question, we generated hundreds of recombinant monoclonal antibodies. At the time, this was a state-of-the-art approach. Within less than two years, we had the first paper out, and others were to follow. It was hard work with all the ups and downs of everyday lab life, but in a great team, and I enjoyed the highly energetic and productive atmosphere. It was the lab that never slept in the city that never sleeps.

We were just finishing the first story when I became pregnant. It seemed like a clear end to my postdoc time, and I told Michel that I would move back to Germany to start a family. How surprised I was when he offered me additional support if I stayed. It had not crossed my mind that this could

be an option, and it was unclear to me how to combine my work life with having a baby. My own mother had never worked after she had kids, and during my PhD I had seen how difficult it was for female scientists to combine a career and family.

I have only good memories about the two more years in New York that followed, which made the decision to move back to Germany to start my own lab difficult. Did I really want to have full responsibility? Would I be able to manage? To explore my options, I applied for a junior group leader position offered by the Max Planck Society. The invitation to start a group in Berlin came through Arturo Zychlinsky, director at the Max Planck Institute for Infection Biology. It was an exciting opportunity and a good option for the family, so we moved. However, the transition was tough. I found it hard to readjust to life in Germany. My second daughter was born less than three years after we returned. By that time, the lab was finally up and running. I had always been passionate about antibody responses to bacteria and parasites, and I engaged in collaborations in this direction — partly to demonstrate my scientific independence, which had been doubted in grant reviews. Michel had never stopped being a supportive mentor after I left his lab, but this was not linked to our projects. My time at the Institute was limited to five years, with a maximum of two-years extensions if I received a positive review from the international scientific advisory board, and with no tenure option.

I started to apply for university positions but was unsuccessful. Although the group continued to publish and was well funded, I started to worry about the future. That our family separated made it much worse. Two little kids and no long-term prospects? I was ready to change my career path, but how could I keep the same freedom to plan my day, do what I love and be able to support the kids? No one I knew was in the same situation. The invitation to give a talk at the German Cancer Research Center (DKFZ)

from my now-colleague Hans-Reimer Rodewald came out of the blue. I had never met him before, and, just as with many other invitations over the years, I declined because I could not easily leave the kids and travel. When I learned that DKFZ was looking for candidates for a tenured and well-funded Helmholtz Professorship, I changed my mind. The visit was very positive, and soon after I received an offer. However, due to my personal situation, I didn't see how I could leave Berlin. In the end, a close colleague, Elena Levashina, convinced me that the only reasonable decision was to accept and not wait for other options that might open up in Berlin. She was right. How freeing it was to have a safe position, and, on top of this, in a great scientific environment. The lab flourished with all of the new options in Heidelberg.

My older daughter keeps telling me that we always have choices. She is right. Mine were to be a mother and scientist. Balancing the two sides is a struggle, but there is a way. Female PIs are mostly seen as role models for young women in science, and I would certainly be happy to see more of them apply for leadership positions to increase diversity, but more so, I hope that being a committed parent and scientist becomes the norm, independent of gender. If this happens, it will reduce the pressure and fear of failure on the part of those who feel that a successful career requires following a plan, rather than taking risks to explore our options and find our passion. □

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