

The Campanil

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Retiring and Remembered | Susan Spiller: All in the Timing

By: Amanda Polick

After 25 years Associate Professor of Biology Dr. Susan Spiller is finally bidding Mills adieu. When her National Science Foundation [NSF] grant was not renewed, it seemed to Spiller like the perfect time to make her exit and retire. She also thinks that there is something really nice about a number like 25.

According to the NSF's website, their grant "funds research and education in most fields of science and engineering." They receive over 40,000 research proposals every year and from there, only 11,000 are accepted. While at Mills, Spiller researched a bioengineering project focused on making red fluorescent tags in living cells to mark the activity of a particular molecule inside that cell. With research being her main focus, it is important for her to be able to continue, which she plans to do despite the NSF grant running out. Through her affiliation with Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, Spiller will be able to continue her research as it is more equipped to handle the needs of her work with high-powered fluorescent microscopes.

Science was not always a path that Spiller saw for herself. Her first undergraduate degree was a bachelors in English from the University of California, Berkeley. Spiller found that she struggles in her English work, but that only made her work harder; she knew that there must be something there that she needed to work on. It was not until her junior year that she discovered that she may have a passion for science. However it was too late in her course work to change majors.

After graduation she was hired by Bank of America to do performance reports in trusts. Working at the then world headquarters of Bank of America in San Francisco enabled Spiller to live in San Francisco, which had always been a dream of hers. Working and living in downtown San Francisco did not suit her for very long. She wanted to be outdoors and in nature, and also decided that she would pursue her passion for science.

So she headed back to UC Berkeley to get her second undergraduate degree in biology. By the end of her second year, she found that she loved being in a laboratory. Experimental science and the physiology of plants were especially intriguing to her. They were both things that she was not expecting to love so much. In trying to decide what to do next, she approached one of her biology professors. He told her that if she wakes up in the morning with all these bubbling ideas about experiments or observations, maybe she should consider a

graduate degree in research. She went on to receive doctorate in plant physiology from UC Berkeley in 1979.

From 1979 to 1988, Spiller went on to receive three postdoctoral degrees from UC Davis, Stanford and UC Berkeley. It was then that her three daughters were old enough for her to return to work. Though she lived in the East Bay for many years, Spiller had never been to the Mills campus until a colleague told her of a job opening at Mills for a professor of plant biology. Twenty five years later, she is leaving as an integral part of the Mills community.

Even though her future in research is opening up, Spiller will miss the constantly enthusiastic students and small community. Students have been a primary focus for her as she can often be seen leading her Exploring Plants class around campus or even sitting down for long chats with students in the lobby of the Natural Sciences Building.

Part of her passion for students included hiring recent Mills graduates to assist in research. This enabled students to not only fill the gap year between undergraduate and graduate school but gave them an additional point on their resume as well as health insurance. Spiller said the additional help was greatly needed as Mills could not appropriately staff for major research. While most students stay only one year, some students end up working for Spiller for two postgraduate years.

Spiller believes that the future is bright for science students at Mills as they will be led by a young and vigorous faculty. If the opportunity ever came for her to be able to teach a research course at Mills, she would gladly take the job.

In terms of her own future, Spiller said she is open to the possibilities.

“I think what I really want is to see what happens, to approach the world with a childlike wonder of time and take time to explore,” Spiller said.