

## Dr. Jeanne Zanca Balances Family Life with a Career in Spinal Cord Injury Research - Ep14

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- JOAN BANKS-SMITH: 00:08 Welcome to Fast Takes Women in Science podcast honoring the International Day of Women and Girls in Science. At Kessler Foundation, seventy percent of our staff are women making major contributions to the advances we achieve in rehabilitation research that changes the lives of people with disabilities. In this episode, I met up with Dr. Jeanen Zanca, senior research scientist in our Center for Spinal Cord Injury Research and Center for Outcomes and Assessment Research. Can you tell us about your scientific background?
- JEANNE ZANCA: 00:43 I have a combined background that includes clinical training as a physical therapist and also a Ph.D. in rehabilitation science, both earned at the University of Pittsburgh. I think, like many people, I wanted to help people. The thing we often hear from many, but it's a good reason, I think, to choose to do anything in life. And I was interested in science and interested in the health sciences and considered whether I wanted to have a career in medicine, and decided that was not the right path for me. But that's an allied health profession, specifically physical therapy, was something that was attractive to me. It gave lots of opportunities to interact mostly with patients and build relationships with them. And that was something I was interested in. And as part of preparing for that and finishing my degree, I had the opportunity to do an honors thesis in biology with Dr. Wise Young at what's now the W.M. Keck Center for Collaborative Neuroscience at Rutgers University and to also be mentored by Patricia Morton there. With my experience with Dr. Morton and Dr. Young, I had the chance to work with the research staff in supporting open houses that the center would hold every month for people with spinal cord injury and their families, which was the focus of the work of that center. And in these open houses, we would get to meet people with spinal cord injury and their loved ones, show them around the lab, explain what we were studying and why, and really connect what we were doing as researchers to the people that we were trying to serve. And I really valued that experience tremendously.
- ZANCA: 02:20 And so as I was thinking about what to do next after finishing my undergraduate training, I was originally planning just to go for my clinical training and physical therapy practice and then go back into research. But Dr. Morton and Dr. Young encouraged me to consider doing a Ph.D. right away. And so Dr. Young said, "Why don't you go ahead and write a letter to my friend Clifford Brubaker," who at that time was the dean of the School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences at the University of Pittsburgh, "and tell him what you're interested in and ask him what he thinks." And so I wrote that letter and expressed my interest in both physical therapy and rehabilitation research and asked for the opportunity to talk about what options there might be and got a very positive response back, that I would have the opportunity to do my Masters of Physical Therapy and Ph.D. at the University of Pittsburgh, and that shaped the rest of my career.
- BANKS-SMITH: 03:17 What does a typical day look like for you?

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ZANCA: 03:18

I am the parent of young children, so I start my day very early in the morning. I usually wake up around five o'clock or so, sometimes a little earlier or later depending on what's going on. And I'll start getting ready for the day and then spend some time doing whatever the most important work task is, whatever needs the clearest head, before the rest of the day begins and I'm pulled in many directions. And then after I've given that time, I will help get my children ready for the day, whether that's going to school or going to daycare, whatever is on the list that day. And then I will head to work either in the office or sometimes working from home these days, given present dynamics. And during my workday, there are many different things that happen, which is really one of the things I love about research is that you get to use a lot of different skill sets and grow a lot of different skill sets. You get to meet all kinds of people and do lots of things. So for me, that could involve working on writing a grant or a manuscript, managing a grant, building a budget, training new research staff that have joined, figuring out how to create a form or build a new system, a new process for some data that we'd like to collect. It also means in many of my projects that involve qualitative research, interacting with people from lots of different backgrounds that have great experiences to share. That's one of the things I love most about the work that I'm involved in presently. All of those things happen in a day that's never typical, never the same, but always interesting and challenging and one that I enjoy.

BANKS-SMITH: 04:52

We'll wrap this up with one final question. What advice would you give to women in your field?

ZANCA: 04:59

I'm going to give a piece of advice that I think applies to everybody, but it is to go ahead and ask. So the trajectory of my training and my research career has been shaped by kind of being in the right place at the right time, but also asking for an opportunity. So, for example, I mentioned earlier that I had the privilege of doing research work at Rutgers University with Wise Young and also with the mentorship of Patricia Morton. And at that time, I was planning to do a master's degree and then they had recommended going into research. And so Dr. Young said, "Why don't you write a letter to my friend Clifford Brubaker, who's the dean of the School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences at the University of Pittsburgh, and tell him what you're interested in and see what he says." And so I wrote that letter saying that I was interested in clinical work but also in research, and wondered whether there might be an opportunity for me to pursue those two directions. And he came back to me and said, "Sure, we'll build a program for you." And basically what happened is they dovetailed the existing Masters of Physical Therapy program at that time with the Ph.D. program in rehab science. So I was essentially the MPT Ph.D. program at that time. And that's not something that I ever would have happened if I hadn't asked for it. And that really was extremely important in setting me on the path that I'm on. And then once I had finished my doctoral studies and was ready for my first research position, I kind of did the same thing. I went around to different centers in the region and presented my background and what I thought I had to offer and asked if we might be able to talk about an opportunity. And so that's how my first postdoctoral position at Mount Sinai School of Medicine came to be. I've learned that if you are in--

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even if it's a small thing. Let's say you're under a big deadline and you need a little extra time on something, just let somebody know and ask, and it might not matter or they might be happy to be flexible. There are new opportunities you can create for yourself and new solutions that can be found if you ask the question and open that door.

BANKS-SMITH: 07:07

Dr. Zanca, thank you so much for taking the time to chat with us today.

ZANCA: 07:11

Thanks so much for the opportunity to speak with you.

BANKS-SMITH: 07:14

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