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At age 5, Peggy probably was thinking about following in the footsteps of her veterinarian father Gale Taylor, D.V.M.

Peggy volunteered as a Candy Stripper while in high school in San Antonio.

Mom Marilyn Taylor, right, joined Peggy for the 2007 Komen Race for the Cure, they walked in memory of Laura Britz, a family friend who had died from breast cancer.
My choice of career as a veterinarian was no real surprise to me or to anyone in my family. I guess you could say I was born into this profession because my father is a veterinarian. Added to that now are my brother and I, who both chose to follow in my father’s footsteps and pursue a career in veterinary medicine.

As a child, I was surrounded by veterinarians — my dad, his colleagues and friends. I was steeped in a climate in which my professional role models were veterinarians, and I liked the vibe. Now (as then), the general public holds veterinarians in high regard and seems to view them with a certain mystique — we are “the gentle doctors.” Maybe it’s because our patients can’t communicate verbally; maybe it’s because they trust us implicitly and rely on us unfailingly to make the right decisions for them. I think all these things play a role in why the profession of veterinary medicine is seen as an honorable pursuit.

The odd bent in my career was my choice of a specialty in laboratory animal medicine. Since this is also my dad’s specialty, you would expect that fact to have significantly influenced my decision, but it really didn’t. His influence extended primarily to my selection of the profession itself. When a member of the general public conjures up an image of a veterinarian, they see the traditional practitioner, working in an office or on a farm, treating companion animals or livestock. Most people don’t envision a laboratory scientist wearing a white lab coat and having rats and mice as the principal patients. It’s this aspect of my career that most people find both fascinating and puzzling. The question that often springs from their lips is: “Why would you want to work on rats when you could be healing people’s pets?”

Indeed, the choice of laboratory animal medicine as a career is not easily understood. As a laboratory animal veterinarian at M. D. Anderson Cancer Center, I provide veterinary care for animals used in cancer research here. My job comprises three major functions: providing an appropriate environment and clinical care for animals, ensuring regulatory compliance, and collaborating on research. Most of my professional colleagues are now Ph.D.s or M.D.s, and most of my patients are rodents. I work in a world where I am neither fish nor fowl — not a traditional basic science researcher and not a physician-clinician. Although my training is in veterinary medicine, most of my scientific contribution is in human medicine. It begs the question: Why would someone want to be the odd man out, the square peg in the round hole for most of his or her career? The answer is complex. For me, the simplest answer is that I fill a unique role that feeds my soul and suits my temperament. My skill set is unique and spans medicine, business management, regulatory compliance, research collaboration and mentoring. My love for animals is reflected in my dedicated commitment to
their humane use in biomedical research. I act as the animals’ advocate in a high-stakes world of animal research and medical progress.

The most important thing my parents did for me was to instill in me an appreciation for the value of education. My mom and dad were born in Illinois in the early 1930s and grew up in working-class families. They were not poor, but neither family was well off. Although none of my grandparents had a college education, they encouraged their children’s education and supported their plans. My dad attended the University of Illinois and obtained his degree in veterinary medicine. During his years there, he met and married my mother. My mom was a good student in high school but had no plans to attend college. As a high school graduation gift, however, she received the money for one year’s tuition at the University of Illinois from a favorite aunt and uncle. It was during that year that she met my dad. She never finished her degree because they got married and she quit school to work and support him while he finished school. When I received my bachelor’s degree in 1981, I was the first person in my mom’s family to graduate from college. I think my mom was prouder of that degree than I was — as soon as I received it, she took it and had it framed so I could proudly display it.

I decided in high school that I wanted to study medicine. Although I had not yet made a final decision about whether to pursue human or veterinary medicine, I decided to attend Texas A&M University because the only veterinary school in Texas was located there. I made the decision to apply to veterinary school during my freshman year at A&M. Mostly, this decision was based on my knowledge of the profession, since my dad is a veterinarian, and on my deep love of animals. Oddly, another thing that attracted me was the challenge. The competition for admission into veterinary school was fierce. I had been a high school athlete in track and basketball and loved the competitive challenge of athletics. I carried this competitive streak with me into the academic arena. The difficulty of gaining admission into veterinary school, rather than intimidating me, challenged and excited me.

My admission into Texas A&M coincided with a number of other firsts in my life. When I moved to College Station, it was the first time I had lived away from my parents’ home; the first time I had to manage my finances, food, laundry and freedom; and the first time I had to live with roommates. I performed well academically, but I must admit that, for awhile, academic education took a back seat to all the other life lessons that I was learning. I was well prepared for university-level academics but less well prepared for the myriad of decisions that I was having to make about all other aspects of my life. I met a man, fell in love and got married — at the time, it seemed like the natural thing to do. I didn’t struggle with the decision to get married or have children; these were things that I had wanted without question from
the time I was a child. In fact, I never remember even remotely considering
the possibility that I might have to choose whether to forego children or
marriage or family. That said, looking back it would have been better if I
had used a bit more planning in the timing of those events. It is possible to
have a marriage, family and career, but these things are big commitments
and require focus, dedication, commitment, and lots of juggling of time and
priorities for everyone for a long time. Thus, my decision to get married,
have my son and start my first year of veterinary school at the age of 21, all
within the same 12-month period, lacked insight. The biggest lesson that I
learned during those years was that I gained an appreciation of the impact
that the decisions of one spouse can have on a marriage. My decision to
take on all those commitments affected my husband as well as me, and it
was unfair and foolish of me to assume that he would feel the same way that
I did about making the required sacrifices. As a result, we divorced while I
was in veterinary school.

After learning from these experiences, my advice for young people is to
focus on your long-term goals. I think it is especially important for women to
realize that a successful marriage requires teamwork and that both partners
must embrace those same goals. I know this is advice that young people have
the least patience with and now find it amusing that this is exactly the advice
that I chose to ignore during my early 20s. Although I wouldn’t say that I
regret my choices, I can see now that making different decisions would have
made things much easier for me.

I pursued my veterinary education despite the turmoil in my personal life,
and encountered several good mentors during veterinary school. A number
of professors advised me on academic performance and career direction.
During veterinary school, I worked part-time for Dr. E. Murl Bailey in the
Veterinary Toxicology department and the laboratory animal research
facility at Texas A&M. At that time, I was more interested in the paycheck
than the career influence, but this early exposure to animal research had a
significant influence later in my life. I learned about the use of animals in
research and about the basic concepts of experimental methodology.

Dr. Claudia Barton, a veterinary oncologist in the small animal clinic
at A&M, was another strong influence. I admired her professionalism and
expertise, and she stimulated my early interest in cancer medicine. One of
the things I admired most about Dr. Barton was her thorough knowledge
of her subject. She seemed to know everything about any particular case in
which she was involved. She knew the recent literature, the current theories
and the recommended treatments, but more than that, she knew the owners’
names, the pets’ names and where they were from. Dr. Barton’s professional
life seemed to reflect the old saying, “If you’re going to do something,
then do it well.” Slowly, through these experiences with my mentors, I was
developing an appreciation and respect for professional and personal focus.

Amazingly, I never felt any gender discrimination while I was in veterinary school. My son was born mid-way through my first year of the program. During my last two years of veterinary school, I was a single mom, but I never felt that anyone treated me differently from any other student. However, it was also true that I didn’t seek any special treatment; I only missed one week of school after the birth of my son, and I missed no more class time than any other students did. I made sure I was always prepared for classes and laboratories and was careful to pull my weight during night and evening clinic rotations. I had a couple of classmates who were loyal friends, and my parents provided tremendous moral and financial support.

Since completing school, my professional life has been divided between private veterinary practice and academic medicine. I spent 10 very rewarding years in private veterinary practice, and now have spent 14 years in academic medicine. Beginning my veterinary career in private practice seemed like the natural thing to do. Most people think of veterinarians as compassionately and carefully caring for people’s pets, and I had that same mental image. I found practice very fulfilling. I loved interacting with pet owners and felt lucky to be able to enjoy many different animals. I have always loved animals, and this part of private practice fed my soul. Companion animals have so much personality; each of them is different, and I developed deep affection for many of my long-time patients.

I departed vet school fully armed with reams of theoretical knowledge and a modicum of practical knowledge about veterinary medicine. I knew anatomy, physiology, pathology, epidemiology — all the important “ologies” of animal medicine. I had developed skills — in animal handling, performing physical exams, auscultation, surgery — I thought I was ready!

And I was ready to interact with and treat my patients. But I soon discovered that I had a whole lot still to learn about how to interact with the humans who also were a part of my new career. I quickly discovered that most animal patients didn’t walk through the front door of my practice by themselves (although some did, and that in itself is a good story). The vast majority of my patients presented as a human-animal duo, much like the chimera of Greek mythology. So I not only had to be concerned about the animals but also had to interact with and develop relationships with their owners, who came in all shapes and sizes. I also had to develop professional relationships with my boss, our employees, the boss’s wife, the drug and equipment vendors, and my professional colleagues. I scanned my bookshelves and reviewed my class notes — where were the notes to help me with these things? How did I miss the class in interpersonal skills? Where was the textbook on business management, dealing with conflict, how to motivate employees, how to communicate in an emotionally charged
situation? I quickly discovered that they don’t call it “practice” for nothing.

Fortunately, I have a naturally agreeable personality and good innate interpersonal skills, and I found good support. I did not know enough to seek out specific leadership training while I was in practice, but I had good mentoring and advice from family and friends. We would discuss difficult situations that I encountered with clients, employees, friends, or family and I would soak in their advice. Also, after I left veterinary school, I remarried, this time to a fellow veterinarian who owned his own practice. Although he had no formal business training, he was a very good natural businessman, and I learned much from watching his style of management and discussing business decisions with him. I had been in private practice for 10 years when I changed directions in my career and entered the world of academic medicine as a laboratory animal veterinarian. By then, I had solid on-the-job training in client interaction, customer service and small business management. Life had prepared me, in quite an unplanned fashion, to take the next step in my career and personal development.

My initial step into an academic research institution was not dissimilar from private practice in many ways. I worked for a boss; provided health care for animals; supervised employees; and interacted with a variety of “clients” in the guise of research investigators, who “owned” the animals. The skills that I had learned in private practice served me well here, and I moved into positions of greater responsibility. In my new role, I benefited from another group of great mentors, who showed me the rules of the game required for success in an academic environment. In business, the end goal was always profit; whoever ran the most profitable business would be the most successful. In a state-owned, academic research institution, the rules for success are different. I learned that the rungs of my ladder were now promotion and/or tenure and that the criteria needed to qualify for advancement fell into three categories: service, teaching and scholarly contribution. Drs. Kenneth Gray and Cliff Stephens were colleagues in my department who served as wonderful mentors to me. “These three elements,” my mentors explained, “make up the legs of a three-legged stool. You don’t have to be equally strong in all three areas, but you must show achievement in all three to be successful.” My skill set grew to include writing manuscripts, teaching students and staff, and mentoring junior colleagues. I loved these new challenges as much as I had loved the challenges of private practice, and I did well in this new environment. A major challenge was to achieve veterinary board certification in the specialty area of laboratory animal medicine, and I achieved this. I was promoted to associate professor and named deputy chairman of the department.

It was at this new level that I saw in sharper focus another distinct difference between a small business environment and academic medicine.
The chain of command in a small business is simple. There is a boss; there may be a few folks directly underneath the boss, and there are employees. The lines of reporting are very clear. This, however, is not the case in an academic environment. Although it is true that I reported to one boss on the organizational charts, that boss was also a peer of those who reported to him. Also, most decisions were preceded by a period of negotiation and review before they were finalized. Thus, the military style of leadership, which is often effective in small business, was not the most effective style in academic medicine. Effective leadership now required teamwork, building consensus, establishing group ownership and creating buy-in. These skills were not as easily learned through on-the-job training. M. D. Anderson’s administration deserves much credit for recognizing this and implementing a faculty leadership program. My chairman recommended me for it, and that was the start of my first formal training in leadership skills.

I feel fortunate to have been treated fairly throughout the majority of my career. My sole experience with gender discrimination occurred when I interviewed for my first professional position. Soon after I accepted it, I learned that a male classmate had been offered the job first and had turned it down. He stated that the reason he was their top candidate was because he did not have personal commitments that might interfere with the job. I interpreted this to mean that although our academic and interpersonal skills were regarded as equal, I was considered the less desirable candidate because I was a single mom. While I understood the reasoning behind this, I still felt the innate unfairness of it. Although I have usually believed that I was judged on my ability, qualifications and experience rather than on the basis of my gender, the sting of that single experience gave me a glimpse of how unfair it is to be judged based on assumptions and personal prejudices.

In truth, the topic of how women can successfully balance the responsibilities between family and profession is a delicate matter and involves personal choice. For me, a professional education is a privilege, not a right. I believe that the recipient of such an education then has a responsibility to use it to help society. I also feel strongly that a person can have a professional career and a personal life and, moreover, that pressure to limit one’s personal life due to work demands acts to the detriment of both the person and the workplace. I never felt that I had to choose between career and family; for me, these two aspects of my life complement each other. My career fulfills me and helps me grow as a person and, as a result, I’m a better parent. I think my children have benefited enormously from having parents with stimulating, interesting full-time careers that they love. My hope is that, as a result of this, my children have learned not to settle for a job that is “just for money” but rather to pursue their passions. I value the M. D. Anderson culture because the administration has made work-life balance a priority.
This reflects an environment that values whole people, and I choose to pursue my career in this type of caring, nurturing environment.

I have always thought it amusing that my ability to advance and achieve leadership roles seemed to owe more to my people skills than to my medical skills. Certainly, I am not discounting the value of my education — I realize that I would not have my position today if I were not a veterinarian with advanced training in laboratory animal medicine. However, my ability to simply get along well with others has always seemed to be one of the most appreciated traits in the workplace. I have found this ironic because, especially in the complex world of medicine and research, this ability seems so basic and simple. This is, in fact, not the case. Leadership is a learned skill, and the development of good leaders is absolutely essential for any organization to survive and thrive. M. D. Anderson has made a strong commitment to developing leaders among its faculty and staff. The Faculty Leadership Academy here had a huge impact on me because it gave me formal leadership training for the first time in my career. Although I had good natural interpersonal skills, I always felt uneasy with conflict and had become reluctant to pursue positions of authority because in those positions, managing conflict was inevitable. Instead of being an aggressive self-promoter who climbs the corporate ladder, I was “the reluctant leader.” The leadership skills that I learned at the Faculty Leadership Academy gave me confidence to take on greater leadership roles. Also, I encountered other accomplished M. D. Anderson women whom I observed and admired: Drs. Margaret Kripke, Elizabeth Travis, Ellen Gritz, Margaret Spitz and Gigi Lozano. All of them served as role models; their success helped me gain the confidence I needed to take on the challenge of chairing a department.

I now feel that I’m entering the most fulfilling and productive years of my career and personal life. My son is married and in law school, and my daughter is a senior in high school and busy making plans for graduation and college. The research programs at M. D. Anderson have grown enormously over the past 10 years, and the challenge ahead is to maintain a world-class animal research program to support the institution’s research efforts. I’m privileged to work with a faculty and staff of over 100 people who share this common goal. We’re all committed to doing our part in “making cancer history.” I bounce out of bed every morning and am excited about what the day will bring. It just doesn’t get any better than this.