

Legends and Legacies Book Chapters

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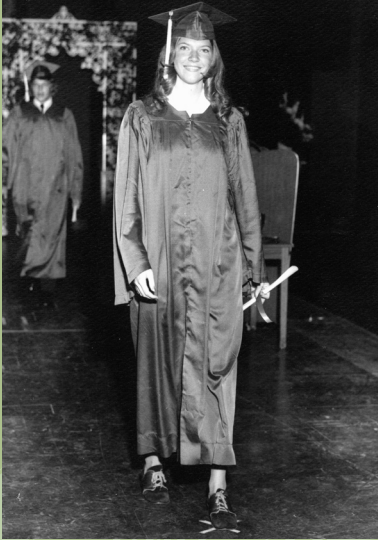


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*A happy Cheryl graduated from
Sunset High School in 1973.*



*Cheryl and husband Mike sat with
son Christopher and daughter Ashley
for the family's 2001 Christmas card
photo.*



*The 2005 "annual girls weekend" in
New York City added another fun
memory for this quartet, from left
Cinda, Muriel, Cheryl and her sister
Gail.*

Even if you didn't grow up in the South, if you are "of a certain age," you may in your youth have dreamed about your future, as I did in the wee hours of the many sleepovers with my girlhood friend, Becky Kilman. The dreams were of medical school and law school, not because these were to be our careers, but rather because these were the places where I would find my doctor husband and she her lawyer husband. The idea that we could actually have these careers ourselves never really entered our minds, but we were sure that these were perfect careers for our future husbands. Thankfully, the idea that if you are female, a career is strictly optional has now come and gone. But at that time and in our circumstances, this was how we were raised. I guess it is ironic that Becky actually did go on to law school at The University of Texas and that I went to UT Southwestern Medical School — and we both obtained our own professional degrees instead of finding lawyer or doctor husbands.

During the 1960s and 1970s, without careers to distract us, girls growing up in the South focused on being beautiful, popular and cheerleaders — or at least being on the drill team. As it turns out, as a young girl I was neither particularly adept at the necessary skills nor did I possess the physical attributes to easily be any of these. However, with lots of effort, by high school I did make the drill team, and although I certainly was not beautiful, my five closest friends grew up to be the five most beautiful girls in our high school. Thus, mostly by association, I came to be regarded as popular, too. On reflection, I now greatly value the people skills that I honed in striving for the adolescent acceptance that seemed so elusive at the time. I learned that being gracious, having a positive outlook, being enthusiastic (and smiling under stress, a drill team staple), and taking an interest in others attracted them to me. These attributes have continued to stand me in good stead as I interact with my colleagues today, and these skills (especially smiling under stress) have been invaluable as I have risen through the ranks to leadership positions in my profession.

As I grew up, my family's financial circumstances evolved from "modest" to "very well off" due to my father's success as an entrepreneur. When I was very young, he took a position as a department store buyer, an event that moved our family from Oregon to Dallas. He then went on to found two large and successful companies. We originally settled in the beautiful Oak Cliff neighborhood in Dallas; however, during the 1960s the area was undergoing a dramatic transition from a lovely enclave to a rundown and blighted neighborhood. As a result, by the time I reached high school our part of town comprised mostly disadvantaged families, with many teenagers from my neighborhood being bused to affluent schools in the northern parts of the city in order to achieve desegregation. "Dismal" is the best way to describe my high school education at one of the most underserved schools

in the district. I'm sure I must have taken the college SAT, though sans any of the prep courses that I now know from my own children's experiences are obligatory and also without any appreciation of the importance of the test, which at the time just seemed like another annoying achievement test that required us to be at school on a Saturday. In fact, if my "underprivileged" high school had a college counselor, I never was aware of one. It was a real eye-opener when my own children attended high school, and I found that not only did high schools have college counselors but also their high school had three counselors for the senior class alone.

One exception to my otherwise inadequate high school education was a fantastic biology teacher named Mr. McKemie. I loved every aspect of his class, from the ubiquitous frog dissections to my first taste of Mendelian genetics. Growing up, I had never been a tomboy, but I *was* fascinated by nature. Like most kids in the 1960s, I played outside a lot, and the nearby woods and golf course creek were my constant haunts. Not only did Mr. McKemie ignite in me a love of biology that had been simmering below the surface, but he also was the only teacher that singled me out as a talented student. It was true that I was talented — I immediately grasped concepts that others found difficult — and Mr. McKemie even let me design experiments to work on after class. This time not only reinforced what I was learning in the classroom but also made me feel special in a way that I hadn't experienced before. It was this interaction with him and the realization and confidence that biology was something I was good at that led me to decide this should be my major in college.

As graduation approached, I was told by my parents, who were by then financially well off, that I could go to any college I wanted; however, this was only partially true. The reality was that I could go to any college that would accept me. Unfortunately, I had no clue about what constituted admissions criteria, and "Ivy League" was not even a part of my vocabulary. What I *did* know was that I had had a great time skiing on Young Life ski trips to Colorado with my church youth group, and since I remembered Denver as a beautiful mountain city in the snow, I thought Denver would be a great place to go to school. Thus, I applied to and was accepted at the University of Colorado. Imagine my shock when I arrived to start my freshman year at the university and found that the campus was in Boulder — *not* Denver!

While I was preparing for my first semester in college, an unanticipated benefit of my less-than-stellar high school education remarkably worked to my everlasting advantage. I had taken chemistry in high school, but this was a subject for which I had very little aptitude and one that was taught with little enthusiasm by Sunset High School's aging golf coach. Even *I* was aware that my knowledge of chemistry was not good enough for college if I hoped to get a degree in biology. Then, the summer after high school graduation,

while lounging at the pool working on my tan (yes, I visit my dermatologist regularly!) and perusing the freshman course list, I noticed that there were two choices for freshman biology: “regular” biology (taught by professors from the Evolution, Population and Organismic Biology department) and “molecular” biology (taught by professors from the Molecular, Cellular and Developmental Biology department). I had never heard of molecular biology, but the course syllabus stated that in addition to molecular biology, “principles of chemistry will be covered.” “Great,” I thought, “a refresher course in chemistry!” So I blithely enrolled in freshman MCD biology, which turned out to be one of the hardest (and most wonderful) freshman courses offered at the university.

And, as it happened, in the 1970s the University of Colorado was one of the few universities in the country to have a department specializing in what was then the “emerging” field of molecular biology. The MCD biology department had stellar faculty, many of whom were in the National Academy of Sciences. As a freshman, I discovered that molecular biology was fascinating and that I had a natural affinity for it (despite having no knowledge of chemistry) — and *I was hooked!* To this day, I remember most of the professors and many of their lectures, and, although the molecular biology of the 1970s was rudimentary compared with today’s science, at the time it was revolutionizing biology. Thus, the irony that participating in church ski trips and receiving a poor high school education ultimately landed me in one of the premier environments for learning molecular biology has not been lost on me. In truth, I consider it providential.

One of my great blessings is that I have been able to find success in a demanding career and still have the fulfillment of a close and loving family. I owe this entirely to my wonderful husband, who has been an equal contributor (and, truth be told, in many respects a greater contributor) to successfully raising two happy, healthy children.

Michael Roland Walker and I were married in 1980, when I was beginning graduate school. Our marriage was actually our second shot at getting it right, as we had dated briefly one summer when I was home from college. That summer, by nights I worked as a waitress, and by day I was at the pool, tanning and playing water volleyball (my favorite sport, as it is the only one I know of that is improved by playing with a drink in one hand). Mike and I met at the pool and enjoyed each other’s company, but we both had other interests (i.e., other girlfriends and boyfriends); thus, when the summer ended, so did our relationship. After graduation, my first job, as a microbiologist working in quality control in the food industry, brought me back to Dallas.

Although I loved my job, taking direction from others has never been my strong suit (this trait is hereditary). I soon realized that without a Ph.D.,

achieving professionally the type of independence I took for granted in every other aspect of my life would be problematic. So I tested the waters by taking graduate classes at night, and I found that I got A's easily and enjoyed being back in school. These grades and a reasonable (but not stellar) GRE score were enough to gain me admission (without a stipend) to the Ph.D. biology program at The University of Texas-Dallas. During this time, Mike and I became reacquainted when we fortuitously bumped into each other while clubbing one night in Dallas (another activity I had gravitated to because it was improved with drink in hand). One date led to another and, after a two-year romance, we married in 1980. It was during this period that the graduate school at UT-Dallas and I had a "falling out" when they tried to coerce me into taking a class I was not interested in just so there would be enough students to "make" the class for a professor who needed the teaching credit. This ruffled my independent spirit, so I re-took the GRE exam and obtained a higher score that qualified me for the graduate program at UT Southwestern Medical School. Armed with that score and a track record of A's in graduate-level courses, I transferred to the Ph.D. program in the Cell Biology department at UT Southwestern.

Graduate school was relatively uneventful until 1983, when our daughter Ashley was born. At the time, I had passed my qualifying exams and was in the home stretch of completing my dissertation in the laboratory of Dr. Jerry Shay. Interestingly, Jerry had been a postdoc in the MCD Biology department at the University of Colorado while I was an undergraduate there, and I had narrowly missed doing my undergraduate research project with his group. Jerry was an inspiring thesis advisor, and I still marvel at his enthusiasm and vision for his research. He and the other faculty were supportive during my pregnancy, and I was able to return to the lab quickly after Ashley was born (we found good daycare for her in a private home). As I recall, the latency period for the tumor cells I had injected into nude mice for the final series of experiments for my thesis (just prior to going into labor) was exactly the same duration as my maternity leave. Upon my return, I sacrificed the mice, took the tumor counts, and demonstrated that we had epigenetically modified tumorigenicity to complete my thesis project.

By the time our second child, Christopher, was born in 1987, we were in North Carolina, where I was a staff fellow at the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS), and by this time we had become all too familiar with the obstacles associated with finding good daycare. Prior to having our second child, I had begun to work with others at the Institute and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to get approval for an onsite daycare center for NIEHS and EPA employees on the NIEHS campus in Research Triangle Park. The process took about two years, but we were ultimately successful. The First Environments Child Care Center

opened at NIEHS in 1986, and I was the first president of the parent-run Board of Directors. NIEHS provided the space and underwrote much of the budget for the center. The parents' organization provided oversight for the center; hired the first director and assisted her with staff hiring; worked out a plan to partner with the NIEHS cafeteria to provide food service; scavenged garage sales for toys, linens and other supplies; and provided much of the infrastructure, including playground equipment, cribs, etc., to open the center on a shoestring budget. The daycare center was a huge success, both financially and in terms of the exceptional high-quality care it provided to children of NIEHS and EPA employees. To this day, the center remains a source of pride for the Institute, the EPA and, truth be told, for me as well.

With the availability of top-notch daycare at First Environments, I returned to work soon after Chris' birth, bringing him to work with me. Ashley was also briefly at the daycare center until she started kindergarten the following fall. Besides knowing that my children were receiving excellent care, I also enjoyed being with them as I went to and from work each day. However, the disadvantage was the "daycare dash" that occurred at 5 o'clock each afternoon, when I had to pause my experiments and run to get the kids from daycare. Chris remained at the First Environments until he was about 4, even after I had left NIEHS to take my first position as a principal investigator at the Chemical Industry Institute of Toxicology, also in Research Triangle Park. Soon, however, I began to travel professionally, and it was quite difficult for Mike to make the long drive to and from home to the daycare center twice a day when I was away. We were sad to withdraw Chris from First Environments but, happily, were able to place him in a good Montessori program until he entered kindergarten.

Since Chris and Ashley were now both in Raleigh and I was commuting to Research Triangle Park, Mike became the primary go-to person whenever the kids were sick or needed to be home from school. This relieved me of the responsibility but, of course, meant that he was now shouldering the vast majority of the day-to-day care of our children. He did this with aplomb and, as it turns out, he was equipped with the patience I lacked when it came to working through homework meltdowns or dealing with routine discipline issues. Thus, he was — and continues to be — a wonderful father and role model for our children.

In time, our children entered the public school system, and we were fortunate to live in excellent school districts that provided them with first-rate educations that prepared them well for entering college. It was during this time that I was recruited back to Texas in 1992 to join the faculty in the Department of Carcinogenesis at M. D. Anderson's Science Park-Research Division. We were delighted to return "home" to Texas, and the Department

of Carcinogenesis was the perfect academic home for my developing research program. I was fortunate enough to come to M. D. Anderson as an associate professor, and I became tenured shortly thereafter, when I received my first R01 grant.

The environment at M. D. Anderson was incredibly fertile for growing a successful research program, and relatively rapidly I was running one of the larger research programs in the department, was promoted to full professor, and eventually received an endowed professorship. Interacting with my colleagues in the department and on the main campus as well as outside the institution has been one of the great joys of my career. In fact, the fantastic research environment and the incredible faculty at M. D. Anderson are two of the main reasons that I have stayed here for the past 16 years despite numerous, and often tempting, offers to relocate my research program. In addition, both the institution and my department chair have been very supportive of my many extramural activities, where I have the opportunity to represent M. D. Anderson on the national and international level and which over the years have become quite substantial. These activities have included numerous advisory board appointments within the NIH, at several universities, and with patient advocacy groups focused on diseases related to my research program. I have also had the opportunity to be very involved in the American Association for Cancer Research and the Society of Toxicology and have been elected to the presidential chain of the Society of Toxicology, for which I will serve as president in 2009.

People who know my hectic schedule will sometimes ask me how I managed to raise a family. I usually quip that I did it by “giving up being an interesting person.” Of course, this is said tongue-in-cheek, but it *is* true that once the children were older and in school, our lives outside of work held little time for activities beyond family, school and church. Although we didn’t always have dinner on the table at the same time every evening (*there’s* an understatement), when we were at the table, we talked rather than watched TV. I can truthfully say that we never missed a play, parent teacher conference or ballgame with our children. The scheduling required to accomplish this was challenging to say the least. Fortunately, the escalation of my professional demands coincided with the kids’ graduating from high school and leaving for college, and, as an empty nester, it became easier for me to meet my ever-increasing professional responsibilities. As an added bonus, with the kids on their own, I now have time to become “an interesting person” again. As a start, I received my open water scuba diving certification last fall (at age 52) and did my first blue water dive in the Caribbean last winter.

Most parents question their parenting skills, and I, too, have worried about whether I have given enough to my children considering all the

demands of my career. Fortunately, both our children have grown to be wonderful adults, leaving little room for second guessing. And, as my daughter volunteered one day, “There are worse things in life than to have a successful mom as a role model.” Bless you, Ashley and Chris, and, most of all, thank you, Mike.

