

Margaret Kripke, Ph.D.
Interview Navigation Materials

Date submitted: 20 August 2019

Interview Information:

One session: 13 December 2007

Total approximate duration: 1 hour 10 minutes

Interviewer: Lesley Brunet

To request supporting materials, please contact:

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Interview Subject Snapshot:

Name: Margaret Kripke, Ph.D.

Interviewed: 2007, 2013

Primary appt: Immunology

Research: photoimmunology

Admin: Executive Vice President and Chief Academic Officer (2001-)

About the Interview Subject

Margaret Kripke, Ph.D. came to MD Anderson in 1983 as professor and founding chair of the Department of Immunology. She was the first woman chair of an M.D. Anderson academic department. She is known for pioneering research focused on ultraviolet radiation's role in skin cancer and the creation of the field of photoimmunology. She became Vice President for Academic Programs in 1998, was promoted to Senior Vice President in 1999, and advanced to Executive Vice President and Chief Academic Officer in 2001.

Major Topics Covered:

Personal and educational background

Research: Photoimmunology

Women Faculty Organization: founding, purpose, institutional support of

About transcription, the transcript, and the views expressed

This interview had been transcribed according to oral history best practices to preserve the conversational quality of spoken language (rather than editing it to written standards).

The Archives may have redacted portions of the transcript and audio file in compliance with HIPAA and/or interview subject requests.

*The views expressed in this interview are solely the perspective of the interview subject.
They do not represent the official views of any other individual or of
The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center.*

Margaret Kripke, Ph.D.

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Margaret Kripke, Ph.D.

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Interview Session One (of one): December 13, 2007

Chapter 00A

Interview Identifier

Lesley W. Brunet

This is Lesley Williams Brunet, about to record an oral history interview with Dr. Margaret Kripke. The date is December 13, 2007. This interview will be conducted in Dr. Kripke's office, on the south campus, at the SCR-2 Building I believe. The interview is being recorded for the MD Anderson Cancer Center oral history project, which is part of the Historical Resources Center at the Research Medical Library at UT, MD Anderson Cancer Center.

Chapter 01: Northern California in the Sixties and Tracking into the Sciences A: Educational Path;

Codes

A: Personal Background;

A: Educational Path;

A: Character, Values, Beliefs, Talents;

A: Influences from People and Life Experiences;

A: Experiences Related to Gender, Race, Ethnicity;

Margaret Kripke, PhD

00:54

I was born in California and went through school there. In fact, I lived in the same town from kindergarten through the end of high school, and then went to the University of California at Berkeley, which was only about 70 miles away.

Lesley W. Brunet

01:09

So you lived in the northern part?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

01:11

Northern California, mm hmm.

Lesley W. Brunet

01:13

I noticed in something I was reading about you, that you always wanted to be a scientist?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

01:19

I have always been interested in biology, and at one point I thought perhaps I would want to go to medical school, and it just wasn't quite the thing that women did in those days. And so I went to university and studied all kinds of biology, and ended up going to graduate school, and I absolutely fell in love with research. It fit with my real love of biology, nature and so on. I like the rigor of science and I like the solving problems and puzzles through science, and so it's been a wonderful career for me.

Lesley W. Brunet

02:04

You got your PhD at Berkeley as well?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

02:06

Yes.

Lesley W. Brunet

02:07

So you went all the way through at Berkeley?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

02:09

Yes. The last two years that I was there actually, my thesis advisor immigrated to Israel, so I actually lived in Jerusalem for two years, for the last two years of my graduate program. I actually did my thesis research in Jerusalem.

Lesley W. Brunet

02:27

Is that where you met Dr. Fidler [oral history interview]?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

02:28

No.

Lesley W. Brunet

02:30

I don't know anything about that.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

02:31

We never knew each other in Israel. We met here many years later.

Lesley W. Brunet

02:36

Oh, here?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

02:37

We met in the United States years later.

Lesley W. Brunet

02:38

Oh okay, because you were married when you came here.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

02:41

That's correct.

Lesley W. Brunet

02:44

Oh that's unusual, two years. And what years were they? What years did you --

Margaret Kripke, PhD

02:47

1968 to 1970. I became pregnant while I was there also, and so I came home from Israel with a PhD and a baby. So my daughter was actually born in Jerusalem.

Lesley W. Brunet

03:00

Oh. I didn't know you had any children. What's it like to be pregnant and have a child when you're working on your PhD dissertation?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

03:10

Well I was pretty much finished with the work and I did still have some writing to do. I came home from the hospital and finished the writing, but that was -- it was timed well, because I didn't start my postdoctoral work until after we came back from Israel. We took some months off and traveled around before I actually went back to work. So it was a particularly convenient time for me to have a baby, take time and have a baby.

Lesley W. Brunet

03:37

When you say we, you and the baby?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

03:40

I was married to another -- someone else.

Lesley W. Brunet

03:42

Someone else. Oh see, I didn't know that.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

03:44

Kripke is the name of my first husband actually.

Lesley W. Brunet

03:46

Oh really?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

03:47

Yes.

Lesley W. Brunet

03:49

I don't know if I'll marry again, but that's how it will all end up. And so '68 through '70, going to school in Berkeley in the 60s must have been interesting.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

04:00

I did do Berkeley in the 60s, yes. It was extremely interesting. It was the time of the great free speech movement. It was actually the time of civil rights, a major civil rights movement and later on, the Vietnam War was the big issue. So there were many political issues. It's kind of amazing to me in retrospect, that I actually got degrees during this period, because there were so many distractions.

Lesley W. Brunet

04:29

The music, the whole Haight-Ashbury scene.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

04:33

Yes, yes.

Lesley W. Brunet

04:35

Do you get flashbacks when you go down doctor, what used to be doctor, Zwelling's Hall, where it had those posters. I was so excited when I saw those.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

04:45

That's my era.

Lesley W. Brunet

04:47

I'm trying to get them to preserve them. I just really -- I think they were fantastic. I'm just a little bit behind. Okay, so you came back and then -- you came back from Jerusalem, you traveled around for a while, and then you went to work in Ohio?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

05:06

Ohio State, yeah. It had been my choice to go to Israel, and my husband, who was an assistant professor of mathematics at Berkeley, took two years off to finish writing a book that he was writing and decided he actually would leave mathematics. So he was retraining in a new field. So when we came back, it was his turn to choose where we were going to go, so he wanted to go to a laboratory in Ohio State, so that's how I ended up there.

Lesley W. Brunet

05:38

So that taking turns really works?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

05:43

Um... (sighs).

Lesley W. Brunet

05:44

Sorry. Maybe this isn't a good line of questions but I can't help it.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

05:46

It's a difficult question. The taking turns worked for us for a while, but of course I ended up not being married to that person, so I don't know whether to say that it worked or it didn't work. It's very difficult because it often happens that there is one job, not two, and that's what happened to us when we left Ohio State and we went to Salt Lake City. I had a faculty position at the University of Utah Medical School and he kind of had constructed a position for himself there, but I was the one who was actually recruited to Salt Lake City.

Lesley W. Brunet

06:28

And you were teaching biology, or by that time you were more specialized?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

06:32

I was an assistant professor in the Department of Pathology, and I was doing research in immunology.

Lesley W. Brunet

06:45

You were there -- I'm not sure if it said how long you were in Utah.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

06:50

'72 to '74.

Lesley W. Brunet

06:57

And then you went to NCI in '75?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

07:04

Yeah, and leaving the husband in Salt Lake City.

Lesley W. Brunet

07:08

How'd you like living in Salt Lake City?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

07:10

I loved it. It's a beautiful place. It's absolutely gorgeous, you know even winter. I don't like winter particularly, having come from California, but the winter there is beautiful because the sun shines and there's snow on the ground and it's really quite gorgeous.

Lesley W. Brunet

07:26

Having the sun shining makes a difference.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

07:28

Yeah. You know, it's not gray and slushy like the Midwest.

Lesley W. Brunet

07:32

Ohio?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

07:33

Yeah.

Lesley W. Brunet

07:33

It depends on where you were. I was east of Cleveland.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

07:36

Ohio was really difficult for me.

Lesley W. Brunet

07:39

It was really difficult for me too.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

07:40

Particularly after Berkeley in the 60s.

Lesley W. Brunet

07:45

We moved to Ohio in '70. I spent three years of high school there, in the snow belt. I never wanted to return.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

07:51

Yeah, likewise.

Lesley W. Brunet

07:54

So you went by yourself, with your daughter or who?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

07:57

With my daughter. During that period, -- I actually met Josh during that period. We were both invited to an American Cancer Society sponsored science writers meeting in Florida, and that's where we met. It turned out that we decided we wanted to find a place to go together. He was in Philadelphia, I was in Salt Lake City. So we were both offered jobs independently of each other, in this new cancer center that was opened by the National Cancer Institute. And so we went to work in Frederick and my daughter, who was four at the time, went with us.

Lesley W. Brunet

08:42

So you still had childcare duties while you were a faculty --

Margaret Kripke, PhD

08:45

Oh yeah. I was a single parent for about a year. It was difficult enough that I have a lot of sympathy for single parents.

Lesley W. Brunet

08:57

It is tricky. That's something I might want to touch on again when we talk about women in research.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

09:05

Yes. A single parent assistant professor is a tough call.

Lesley W. Brunet

09:10

Do you think having children holds people -- not holds them back, but women don't move as quickly in their careers if they have a family too, or if they have children too?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

09:23

I think it affects different people different ways. Yeah, I do think it impedes career progress, even in my case, where I was a dedicated professional and I did not ever really stay home; it was the childcare dues. There were times when I could not travel because of my childcare responsibilities. I simply couldn't go to scientific meetings, which certainly does impede your progress and your visibility in the scientific community. So it has to have some kind of an impact, unless you have live-in help, so that you have complete freedom to do all those other things. It is a deterrent to progress for a period of time.

Lesley W. Brunet

10:13

I used to interview a lot of faculty at Baylor. When I first moved to Houston, I came to the TMC and many of the women I interviewed started there in the late 40s and 50s, and they would talk about just how difficult it was. But our whole society has changed in a way, so it may be easier for single parents now sort of, or we're just getting used to it.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

10:41

But the travel issue is still a problem. I have seen many women in recent years, bringing children to some national center (inaudible), but it's very difficult. It's still very difficult.

Lesley W. Brunet

10:53

And is it looked down upon?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

10:58

No, I don't think so, but it restricts your mobility.

Lesley W. Brunet

11:01

At the meeting?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

11:02

Mm hmm. Part of the purpose of going to those meetings is to network and to spend time seeing colleagues and talking science. So yeah, I think it does. It's better than not going at all, but it's not like going by yourself.

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Lesley W. Brunet

11:19

It's getting pulled at both sides. So you started in Frederick, about the same time as Dr. Fidler, or he came later?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

11:30

I came a few months before but basically, we started at the same time.

Lesley W. Brunet

11:35

And tell me again what you were doing.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

11:39

We were both laboratory directors. We were hired to initiate new laboratories, in a new -- this was a new cancer center that actually was on the Fort Detrick property. Fort Detrick was an Army biological warfare research place historically, and under the Nixon Administration, they decided to make it into a cancer center. And so we were the first people to actually go there to set up research programs on the Frederick campus.

Lesley W. Brunet

12:14

How was Frederick?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

12:16

We loved it, because it was a small town. It's rural Maryland, it was beautiful.

Lesley W. Brunet

12:24

I've lived in Maryland.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

12:25

And we loved the lifestyle. My daughter could walk to school. I was two minutes away from the house, so if I needed to go home to do something or if I had a sick kid or whatever, it was very convenient. We liked living in a small town and the atmosphere. We had a lot of fun in those days. Eventually, actually my mother moved there from California and bought a small house in Frederick, and so that really solved my travel problems.

Lesley W. Brunet

12:58

Help.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

12:59

Yeah. So she was there for five of the eight years that we lived in Maryland, and so that was an enormous help.

Lesley W. Brunet

13:07

So you were there for eight years?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

13:08

Mm hmm.

Lesley W. Brunet

13:10

And you were working in immunology?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

13:15

Mm hmm.

Lesley W. Brunet

13:18

Can you tell me a little bit about what you were doing? I saw an article in '77.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

13:23

Yeah. I had started the work in Salt Lake City. I had worked on a project that involved reducing skin cancers with ultraviolet light. And being an immunologist, I was interested in studying immunology of those cancers. It was not part of the project I was hired to do, but it was something that I was doing on the side. And it turned out that those skin cancers had very, very interesting and unusual immunology properties, and investigating that really formed the basis of the entire rest of my career, because my whole career has been focused on skin cancer and the immunology of skin cancer, and the effects of ultraviolet light on the skin and on the immune

cells in the skin, which is part of the whole pathogenesis of skin cancer. So I continued that work.

Lesley W. Brunet

14:18

So in the beginning, when you were doing immunology, you were already focused on skin cancer and working with cancer?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

14:27

Yeah, even my PhD thesis was immunology and cancer. It wasn't on skin cancer at the time, but my whole career has been spent on cancer and immunology.

Lesley W. Brunet

14:37

I should back up and ask what I meant to. When you were growing up in California and even in school, is anyone in your family in science or medicine?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

14:50

No. My father was an avid naturalist and it probably comes from there, but I just -- I really love biology. I have always loved biology. When I learned about research and the process of doing research and asking and answering scientific questions, that was what really captured my attention.

Lesley W. Brunet

15:20

I can relate to that with research. Did your family have a history of cancer, or did that have any role?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

15:28

No.

Lesley W. Brunet

15:29

So it was more like an intellectual issue?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

15:34

I was interested in biology. I probably would have been very happy in any aspect of biology. The way that I ended up in immunology was -- it's actually kind of an interesting story. When I was in my junior year at Berkeley, I really didn't know what I wanted to do. It was clear that my grades were not going to be good enough to get me into medical school. It was very tough for women to go to medical school in those days.

Lesley W. Brunet

16:00

You were coming out of Berkeley?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

16:03

I was not at the top of my class, and so I was really quite -- I was really floundering. I really didn't know what I wanted to do. I took a course -- during the course of things, I took an introductory course in bacteriology, and the two professors who taught that course wrote letters to all the students who had done well in the class. I did get an A in that class. They wrote letters to all the students who had done well in the class, asking them what they were going to do with their lives and would they -- and inviting us to come and talk with them about our career. It was very unusual. It was at a time at Berkeley when there was a lot of concern that professors were only interested in graduate students and they weren't interested in undergraduates, and that undergraduates were somehow being neglected. And the other thing that was going on historically was that that was the height of the Sputnik -- post-Sputnik era, where there was a lot of money available to people in science, in all aspects of science.

And so I went to meet with the professors. I was very interested in input one of them was doing, the immunologist was doing, and he was the immunology and cancer person and he said, why don't you go to graduate school, and I said, "Great, what's that? Tell me about that." And so I ended up going to graduate school and I was his graduate student, and he is the one who got invited to Israel. So that's how --

Lesley W. Brunet

17:38

And his name?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

17:40

David Weiss.

Lesley W. Brunet

17:41

W-E-I-S-S?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

17:43

Mm hmm. He went to be head chairman of the Immunology Department at the medical school in Jerusalem. And so I probably could have been happy in any aspect of biology, but that was my opportunity and I liked it a lot. The cancer issue resonated with me. It was an interesting biology problem, immunology was a very interesting biology infusion, and so I simply stayed there for the whole rest of my career.

Lesley W. Brunet

18:20

Were there other people, when you were growing up, that influenced your life toward science?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

18:27

I grew up in a very small town in California, but we had very good teachers in our school. I had lots of high school teachers who were terrific. I had a sixth grade science teacher who was wonderful. So I was influenced a lot by teachers.

Lesley W. Brunet

18:45

Public or private school?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

18:46

Public. Yeah, public school.

Lesley W. Brunet

18:49

That's always nice to see.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

18:51

Yeah. I suspect it was a very unusual community, because it had very high level teaching. I actually --

Lesley W. Brunet

19:01

What was the name of the town?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

19:03

Healdsburg. H-E-A-L-D-S-B-U-R-G. Healdsburg, California. It's in Sonoma County, the Russian River area. I was actually encouraged to apply for some summer programs, summer science programs, by one of my high school teachers, and did so and was accepted into a program for future scientists that was sponsored by the National Science Foundation. So I spent a summer going to a program at Santa Clara University and studying science of all kinds, but it was focusing on biology.

Lesley W. Brunet

19:44

And do you think that kind of extra opportunities made a difference in your career?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

19:58

I think I would have ended up where I ended up anyway. The thing that really influenced my career were the professors who said what are you doing with your life and do you want to come and talk to me about it. That was a huge turning point in my career.

Lesley W. Brunet

20:14

And were they really doing it because of the idea that professors weren't reaching out to undergraduates?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

20:22

I think so, yeah, yeah.

Lesley W. Brunet

20:33

OK, so we're back in Frederick and you work at NCI, it went well, from what I can see.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

20:42

Yes. They had lots of resources and we did lots of -- we really did a lot of science during that period.

Lesley W. Brunet

20:53

Were you aware of MD Anderson when you were at the NCI in Frederick?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

21:02

I'd been aware of MD Anderson for a very long time, primarily because of the annual symposium on all cancer research. I'm trying to think which meeting I went to. When I was still in Salt Lake City, I came to one of the MD Anderson symposia. It was on immunology and cancer, about 1972. Actually it was just as I was coming to Salt Lake City. It was who's who in cancer and immunology. So I knew about the institution and met some of the people, who were here at that time. So yeah, I knew about MD Anderson from that series of scientific meetings.

Lesley W. Brunet

22:10

So that would have been -- Dr. [Gunn? was working with immunology.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

22:16

Yeah, Dr. (inaudible).

Lesley W. Brunet

22:17

Were there other?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

22:25

I think it was primarily immunology.

Lesley W. Brunet

22:33

What did you think about interferon?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

22:37

I didn't like it.

Lesley W. Brunet

22:41

Went to Anderson. OK, this was too early.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

22:48

So yeah, I knew of MD Anderson when I was in Frederick. And of course by then, we also knew other people. Garth Nicolson was a collaborator of Josh's, and we knew Fred Leffert from scientific meetings. He was of course in carcinogenesis. There were fewer scientific meetings in those days, and so we would meet people from all over, at things like the Gordon Conference on Cancer. Both Josh and I were chairs of that meeting.

Lesley W. Brunet

23:27

I'm sorry, what was the name of it?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

23:29

Gordon Conference on Cancer.

Lesley W. Brunet

23:39

And where was that held?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

23:40

Generally in New Hampshire.

Lesley W. Brunet

23:47

So I assume you got to know more of the leading people, because if there were fewer meetings.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

23:52

Right, few meetings, and people stayed for the whole meeting.

Lesley W. Brunet

23:57

Would they always stay for the whole meeting?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

23:59

They did in those days, yeah.

Lesley W. Brunet

24:01

That's where I see my friends.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

24:02

And the MD Anderson symposium was another one that was -- when it was on a topic of interest, was another one that was very well attended from outside of the institution. Now there are so many meetings, it's hard to get anybody to go to anything, because there are just too many other opportunities.

Lesley W. Brunet

24:27

Is it because they are so much more specialized now?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

24:30

No, I think it's just because there is a huge proliferation. You could go to a meeting a week if you wanted.

Lesley W. Brunet

24:44

So what about the -- I'm trying to think of what they call it. Photosynthesis, that's not it. The whole part of the sun and immunology; you already were studying that?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

25:08

I was. The only reason I was studying photobiology was because it's what caused skin cancer. That was one of the models that was being used in Salt Lake City. There was actually a hint in the literature when I was writing my PhD thesis. I wrote a whole review on immunology and cancer, and there's actually a sentence in my thesis that says that skin cancer is induced by ultraviolet light and it might be immunologically interesting and it would be interesting to look at the effects of ultraviolet light on the immune system. It was really not a totally naïve statement, but it turned out to be exactly correct, and so I had the opportunity to actually do that when I went to Salt Lake City. And so that's where my interest in photobiology came from, actively in photobiology.

Chapter 03

Coming to MD Anderson to Build a New Department

A: The Researcher;

Codes

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A: Personal Background;

Lesley W. Brunet

26:02

That would be hard for me. So who approached you about coming down to MD Anderson?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

26:16

We had been approached. Actually Josh had been approached several times in the past, about coming to MD Anderson, both by Fred Becker and by Garth Nicolson. We came to a point in Frederick where there were leadership changes and there were changes in direction. It made it less appealing for us to be there, and so we decided to look elsewhere and Josh simply picked up the phone and called his friend Garth and said, are there still opportunities, are you still recruiting at MD Anderson? And the answer was yes, and we were both invited for interviews.

Lesley W. Brunet

26:57

You were invited by Nicolson or by --

Margaret Kripke, PhD

27:00

Dr. Becker [oral history interview
was the one.

Lesley W. Brunet

27:01

Dr. Becker, that's what I assumed.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

27:02

He was the primary recruiter. And so we actually didn't job hunt too much, because it was really clear that it would be hard to find another place where there will be such a wonderful opportunity for both of us. So we were lucky twice; once going to Frederick, where we were both offered directorships independently of each other, and then coming here, where we wanted to go

somewhere else and there were two departments and chairs, both of them, and (inaudible). It was a very unusual opportunity for us and we were very fortunate. So we didn't even look at anything else, we just came.

Lesley W. Brunet

27:52

How did Anderson measure up in terms of basic research? That was like in '83?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

27:58

Well, you have to understand our history. When we went to Frederick from where we came from, there was no place else, and we built a program from scratch. So we were not particularly concerned that there wasn't a gigantic basic research effort at MD Anderson. We knew the reputation of the institution through symposia that they supported. We knew from Becker, from scientific circles, and the institution provided everything that they had promised and more. And so we were really not concerned about who else was here, in terms of basic science. Of course we understood that it was a wonderful opportunity for us, if we were ever interested in doing anything with human cancer. And of course Josh's work is very much focused on human cancer, and he was really new to being in Frederick without a clinical outlet for his work. And so that part was also extremely attractive for us. It was not only a cancer research institute but it was a cancer hospital.

Lesley W. Brunet

29:13

I didn't realize that he worked so closely with the clinical side.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

29:22

Yeah, he does.

Lesley W. Brunet

29:22

I mean, I guess it makes sense.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

29:26

He does. Part of that, he has a veterinary background, so he actually has a medical background, so he thinks in that way.

Lesley W. Brunet

29:32

That way. I knew they were ecstatic about you coming here and they have been all along.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

29:41

Well we were ecstatic about coming.

Lesley W. Brunet

29:44

Hardly anyone says that when they talk about coming to Houston.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

29:47

Well, really I always said I wish MD Anderson was in Austin or San Antonio or someplace else. And in fact, when I attended the MD Anderson symposium here in the past, I couldn't imagine how people lived here in the humidity.

Lesley W. Brunet

30:07

It's so good for our skin.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

30:09

I have discovered that since I've been here. We absolutely adore living in Houston and may never leave.

Lesley W. Brunet

30:19

From the get-go or has it grown on you?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

30:25

It has grown on us, but we never disliked Houston. For us you know, our level of comfort living in a place is what work is like, because we spend 90 percent of our time there, and work was fabulous from the beginning and we grew to love the community. You know, in 1983, there weren't a whole lot of restaurants in Houston, so that whole scene, watching Houston develop and diversify and become more cosmopolitan has been really fun. You know, when we recruit people here, the thing that I think is so impressive about Houston is the diversity of everything, not just the population. Houston has something for everybody, whether it's Irish dancing or the Harpsichord Society or a football team or the symphony. Whatever interests you can be found in Houston. It's an amazing place and everything is very accessible. It's not like living in Washington or New York or Boston where going out for an evening was a major big deal of organization.

Lesley W. Brunet

31:44

Because of the drive or?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

31:45

The drive, parking, getting tickets, all of that kind of stuff. Here you know, if you decide on a moment's notice that you want to go to the theater, you can drive down, park in the parking garage and go get our tickets. It's not a major logistical challenge.

Lesley W. Brunet

32:03

And you live in town, or do you have a country place?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

32:06

We do both. When we first came here, we went to Kingwood, because my daughter started high school. And so she went to Kingwood High School.

Lesley W. Brunet

32:16

That's quite a hike.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

32:17

Yes, it was quite a hike and it became very tiresome after a while, so we gave that up. We moved into town -- I'm not remembering how many years we were in Kingwood; almost 15 probably, 14 or 15.

Lesley W. Brunet

32:37

So she grew and graduated and went to college.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

32:39

Yes. We moved into town, into a high rise, which I hated. I just couldn't deal with it. We were in the high rise for a couple of years and I was just not ready for that lifestyle. So we bought a house in town, in the Museum District. We had lived at the Park Line, which is right on the park, and so we bought a house.

Lesley W. Brunet

33:01

On Harwin Drive?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

33:02

Yes. So we bought a house on Banks Street, that neighborhood, and we were there for a number of years. Once we bought the house, we bought property out in Magnolia, Texas, and built a weekend place there. Once we had the weekend place, the house in town became a burden. And so all of the gardening and things that I like to do are now done out in Magnolia, and so we're back in a high rise in town and this time love it, because we have the other alternative on the

weekends and whenever we choose. So that works well. So we're still in the Museum District. We live in the Museum Tower actually, on Montrose.

Lesley W. Brunet

33:45

Is that the one that's on the east side, they renovated, or going north?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

33:50

It's on the -- going north, it's on the east side, yeah. It's a big building.

Lesley W. Brunet

33:57

But it looks like it's older. Maybe I'm thinking of the wrong one.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

34:03

It's right across the street from Bell Park, if you know where that is, on Banks Street, there's that one stoplight.

Lesley W. Brunet

34:08

Oh, I think so. Yeah, so you're close in.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

34:12

Very.

Lesley W. Brunet

34:14

And you survived the floods in 2001. I guess it didn't really flood there did it?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

34:19

Our house on Banks Street was quite high and somehow we did not flood. We were close to flooding. There were other houses on our street that got flooded but ours did not.

Lesley W. Brunet

34:30

I know I lost St. Margaret's that way, people's houses, more flooding. So you usually spend time there on the weekend? And do you have horses?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

34:43

We do, and I'm a very avid rider.

Lesley W. Brunet

34:47

Honestly, I heard this, because of Dr. Tomasovic and his horses.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

34:50

Oh yes, yes. In fact, I did three-day eventing competitively for a number of years, which is cross-country jumping, stadium jumping and a little bit of dressage.

Lesley W. Brunet

35:03

You mean as a young adult or recently?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

35:06

No. I just --

Lesley W. Brunet

35:07

Yesterday?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

35:08

I gave it up about three or four years ago. The jumping part, I had to give up because of my back. So I've traded the jumper for a dressage horse, so I'm actually doing dressage, which is not jumping.

Lesley W. Brunet

35:25

What's dressage? Is this English riding?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

35:27

Yes. It's English riding. Have you ever seen the Lipizzaner Stallions, the white stallions from Austria?

Lesley W. Brunet

35:32

Oh, oh, I've heard of them.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

35:34

And they do all kinds of fancy things? Well that's the highest level of dressage. I don't ride at that level. I ride at a lower level, but it's kind of harmony between horse and rider and you do -- I did compete occasionally and it's like figure skating. You do a prescribed pattern.

Lesley W. Brunet

35:54

This is how you relax?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

35:57

Yeah.

Lesley W. Brunet

35:57

That's good. And gardening?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

36:00

Yeah.

Lesley W. Brunet

36:03

What do you do when the Renaissance Fair comes? Stay in town?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

36:08

We try to stay home, yeah. (laughs) We try to avoid the roads.

Lesley W. Brunet

36:13

Boy it's an interesting group to descend on your neighborhood.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

36:16

Yeah. Oh, we hate that, yeah, yeah.

Lesley W. Brunet

36:21

When you got here, were there other impressions? Did you know a lot about what was going on the clinical side?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

36:34

No. We were here on the south campus from the beginning.

Lesley W. Brunet

36:41

Oh, from the beginning.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

36:42

We were in the Smith Research Building, both in the Department of Immunology and the Department of Cell Biology, which is Josh's department, when we started out. So we were pretty well disconnected from all the clinical activities.

Lesley W. Brunet

37:04

And there was a certain amount of discontent over Developmental Therapeutics and the Department of Medicine, because by then, they had closed the developmental therapeutics.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

37:21

We were out of the controversies and out of the politics pretty much. Josh was very good about establishing collaborations with clinical collaborators, and has a continuous stream still, of clinical fellows who come and work in his department and in his laboratory. So he's been very active in training physician scientists. I have been more distant from that, although in my last few years running a research lab, I did work with clinical collaborators and developed a program project around skin cancer, that had clinical components to it.

Lesley W. Brunet

38:09

Did that sort of distance and not getting involved in the politics help when you were brought in to the executive offices?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

38:24

I would say no, because I didn't know enough about the clinical side, so all of that was kind of catch up learning. That was (inaudible) to a different level of administration.

Lesley W. Brunet

38:41

But you didn't have enemies that you know, other people might have.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

38:45

No, no. We were pretty clear of controversy.

Lesley W. Brunet

38:52

That's unusual in a medical center. I always give presentations on cooperation and conflict at various -- not when I was here but at some of the other institutions. I don't want to take up too much time.

Chapter 04

Taking on Gender Inequity at MD Anderson; Establishing the Organization for Women

B: Building the Institution;

Codes

B: Gender, Race, Ethnicity, Religion;

C: Evolution of Career; A: Personal Background;

C: Professional Practice; C: The Professional at Work;

C: Leadership; D: On Leadership;

C: Obstacles, Challenges; C: Controversies;

C: Experiences of Injustice, Bias;

C: Women and Minorities at Work;

Lesley W. Brunet

Before we get to that, when you -- I want to talk about the women's faculty organization, and how that got started.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

39:29

Dr. LeMaistre asked me to chair a committee on the status of minorities in the institution, and I suppose this came from an initiative I think, from the board of regents members who had some concerns about that issue. I agreed to chair the committee, and I enlisted the help of Judy Watson, Judy [Johns?] at the time.

Lesley W. Brunet

39:55

What year would this have been? Eighty...

Margaret Kripke, PhD

39:57

Oh gosh. (inaudible). And after talking with Judy, we decided that we should go back to the president and perhaps see if we could convince him to include women as a minority.

Lesley W. Brunet

40:21

Oh, so it was just minorities. I don't suppose you know who on the board was interested in that?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

40:28

No.

Lesley W. Brunet

40:30

You would think so, by 1990.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

40:33

I actually don't know whether that was the allegation or not. I always thought it was, but I don't really know that. But in any case, I agreed to chair the committee. Committee members were selected by the president, and I had really never done anything like that before, nothing really at the institutional level. But I said yes. I thought it was -- I was interested in doing it, and so there were two parts of the study. One was faculty and the other was staff and -- administration and staff. And so I had -- probably had a co-chair who was from the administrative side, and there were a lot of very good people in the institution, both administrative and faculty. And so we did our study and did data analyses, and what was really essential was that we were given completely open access to all the data. And so we were able to -- and on the faculty side -- my interest was on the faculty side, and on the faculty side, there were so few minorities that it wasn't hardly worth talking about, because there just weren't any, there were so few at the time. And so we spent a lot of time analyzing the status of women faculty in the institution. We were able to look at salary information, years before promotion, the leadership positions, endowed positions, honors and awards, all of those kinds of things. And so the report got written and it pointed out that we don't have enough minorities or women in positions of leadership in the institution. There were some inequities in salary, particularly for women on the clinical side. It was clear that there were very few women. There were so few women in those days who actually were professors.

Lesley W. Brunet

42:49

And there were -- there had been some here for a long time.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

42:52

Yes, yes, but there were not very many of them. There was very -- vanishing, the few women in positions, were not really appointed to committees very regularly. So we wrote our report and turned it in, and there was an executive summary of it that was distributed to the faculty. And about a week later, I got a telephone call from Lillian Fuller and Lillian said, "Well, I saw your report, it was very nice." I said, "Thank you very much," and she said, "And so what are you going to do about it?" I said, "Lillian, I'm not going to do anything about it, you know I'm finished. My job was to do a report, so we did a report." She said, "But it's just going to collect dust on somebody's shelf, you've got to do something about this." And I said, "Well Lillian, why don't we have lunch and talk about this?"

Lesley W. Brunet

43:43

Was she a full professor by then?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

43:45

Mm hmm.

Lesley W. Brunet

43:45

Oh she was. Because I got the feeling, she was --

Margaret Kripke, PhD

43:49

She was close to retirement actually.

Lesley W. Brunet

43:53

But I got the feeling she encountered some resistance.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

44:00

Oh yes, oh yes. And she was still miffed about that.

Lesley W. Brunet

44:05

She's still miffed about it I think. I actually still talk to her.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

44:09

You know, Lillian did not have an easy time at MD Anderson.

Lesley W. Brunet

44:15

Well, any medical center.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

44:16

Well, it's a very male-dominated institution. I'm sure it's different (inaudible). It's southern and it's medical and it's very conservative. I believe I was the first female chair of any of the academic departments. There was a female head of nursing, but there were no department heads, women heads to be found.

Lesley W. Brunet

44:46

Do you think the southern part really played a factor?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

44:53

Yeah, yeah I do. It's a difficult thing to --

Lesley W. Brunet

44:57

Good old boys. I thought that was in New York too. I thought it was all over.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

45:04

It's a different -- it had a different flavor in those days.

Lesley W. Brunet

45:10

Can you give me an example?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

45:14

Men are more paternalistic. I mean Dr. LeMaistre, whom I adore and who doesn't have a malicious bone in his body, was always very solicitous. He didn't want me to walk to my car alone after an event. I always had to find somebody to walk me to my car, you know very, very solicitous. And in some cases it's fine and in some cases it's patronizing. That's not a northeastern thing and that's not a California thing.

Lesley W. Brunet

45:54

That they're, that they're --

Margaret Kripke, PhD

45:56

Over-solicitous and patronizing. It's patronizing in the, in the -- under the guise of southern gentile.

Lesley W. Brunet

46:14

I would agree with you there.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

46:15

OK yeah, that's what I meant. It could be patronizing anywhere in the country but it's not under the guise of southern gentile. So anyway, I said, "Well, let's do lunch and we'll get some people together." So I got Judy Watson and Lillian and Liz Travis [oral history interview . Liz and I were the administrators. I don't remember who else. Margaret Spitz [oral history interview may have been present by that time. And we sat around and Lillian said, "You know, you really need to do something for women. We need to organize something to support women in the institution, and why don't you do that?" I wouldn't commit, and I thought about that very hard. I have never been an activist, a gender activist. I have never been a joiner, I had never joined women's groups. I had grown up in an era where the best thing you could do is pretend that you know, you're not different, and so not drawing attention to myself as a woman was really part of my (inaudible). And so I really didn't want to do that and I thought, "You know, what if the president and my boss and everybody think this is not the right thing for me to do. They could fire me for this. I'm not going to organize the women and make enemies across the institution."

And then I thought about for -- I thought about it for a while and it finally dawned on me. I had a huge revelation that short of committing a felony, they wouldn't fire me from my research, because I was absolutely untouchable there. I was a full professor with tenure.

Lesley W. Brunet

48:10

I was going to say, highly regarded.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

48:15

The only woman department chair they had. Between my husband and I, we owned --

Lesley W. Brunet

48:22

The whole building?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

48:23

Probably a quarter -- no, a quarter of the basic science in the institution, so if I left he left. And I thought, I can do anything I want to and I'm in a position to do something.

Lesley W. Brunet

48:34

That must be a wonderful feeling.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

48:36

It was incredibly liberating and I feel so stupid, you know I should have figured it out a long time ago. But it took that moment of really thinking about "what could I risk in doing something like that," and the answer was, I wasn't risking anything. You know as long as I didn't make a fool of myself or embarrass the institution, what could possibly happen?

Lesley W. Brunet

48:57

Can I ask you a question?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

48:58

Yeah.

Lesley W. Brunet

48:59

How old were you when you --

Margaret Kripke, PhD

49:03

I would have to figure out what year that study was done. I actually do have a copy of the report. Do you have a copy?

Lesley W. Brunet

49:12

Well, I have the WFAO record.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

49:17

It may be in that.

Lesley W. Brunet

49:18

Well I know it was in there.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

49:19

Yeah, it is in there.

Lesley W. Brunet

49:20

I'm thinking '91.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

49:22

Yeah, it's something like that. So in '91, I was 50-something, 48, 47. I was 48.

Lesley W. Brunet

49:43

OK. I wonder if it was that 50 thing.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

49:49

It didn't have any -- it really was a result of Lillian made me actually. (laughs) I actually came here as a department chairman just before my 40th birthday.

Lesley W. Brunet

50:06

That's pretty good.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

50:07

I thought that was pretty good, although I think Doris Nicholson was younger. I don't think I was the youngest but I was relatively young.

Lesley W. Brunet

50:20

That is young and successful.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

50:28

So, out of that discussion came the women's faculty organization, and we organized and we got a lot of women faculty, and we did a needs assessment. What is it that you would like to have that you don't have? What are the issues that are of concern to you? I think Ellen Gritz [oral history interview

was part of it too, because she helped design the survey...the behavioral scientist. And Margaret Spitz was also very much involved in that. And so we did our little needs assessment and figured out what the issues were that people were concerned about. Interestingly, it wasn't childcare at the time. It was not childcare. People were interested in promotion, not being in the network, isolation, salary.

Lesley W. Brunet

51:22

Salary.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

51:22

There is still a pervasive impression among women in the institution that they were underpaid relative to... You know, I don't think there's a lot of objective evidence for that. In fact, Steve Tomasovic [oral history interview

has spent a lot of time analyzing that, and so there doesn't seem to be any systematic bias against women in salaries. But the women are always coming forward with examples of how my qualifications are just the same as so and so's, and they're making more than I am, or I held that job, when I held that job, I was paid at -- somebody brought in somebody else and paid him...

Lesley W. Brunet

52:04

That happens even if it was a woman. No matter -- whoever replaces you always gets more money. That's why you have to go somewhere else.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

52:11

Right. So we set out to address a lot of those issues, and we had full support from the faculty and we had lots of support from the administration. We did a salary analysis, we looked at salary equity. We got the promotion and tenure committee to extend the tenure clock for women who were pregnant. It wasn't actually for women specifically. It was for people with medical issues. So if you had a serious operation or something, you could get your tenure extended. That's been in place since the early 90s. So we did make some progress. We insisted that there be women put on all the important committees. We lobbied for women being given endowed positions. I think we did the easy stuff, but not much of substance has changed since that time, because then you run into the issue that not having a lot of women in leadership positions was a cultural issue.

It's not about systematic bias, it's not about overt discrimination. It's much more subtle and much more cultural and ingrained and therefore, much more difficult to deal with.

Lesley W. Brunet

53:37

Now it's cultural in the sense of MD Anderson or in medicine, academic medicine?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

53:42

MD Anderson and not in academic medicine, which is true in academic medicine across the country and in other countries as well. There's a story that is told very often, of a symphony orchestra that decided that they would do their interviewing behind a screen, and over the last 20 years have increased the number of women performers by far. So when you can't see who's performing, you're only listening to the music. You take the gender issue out of the equation, all of a sudden women are hired into symphony orchestras. So there are completely unconscious biases. It's what Virginia Valian has called gender schemas, where your expectations of women are different than your expectations of men.

Lesley W. Brunet

54:53

I agree with that.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

54:56

So that's what -- so one of the things, since I had really been a champion for women faculty members and for trying to recruit more senior women into the institution, one of the things that troubled me greatly when I talked about retirement was who is going to carry this charge forward, because it was clear that there wouldn't be another women in the executive suite. And so that's why I created the position for (inaudible). So that there would be some institutionalizing of the mission to promote successive women in the institution.

Lesley W. Brunet

55:44

Does she run risk by being in this position, I mean for her career? Do you know what I mean?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

56:06

Not at this stage of her career, because she is within probably five years of retiring, and she's a full professor and she has an endowed position.

Lesley W. Brunet

56:19

So she's in a good position to do that.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

56:22

And she's making an academic career out of this position. She's writing things and publishing things about women in academia, and becoming very -- raising her own visibility in that community, rather than inside. She still runs a laboratory and is active scientifically, but this is a career move for her. If she were an assistant or an associate professor I would say yes, because there was a study done a number of years ago. I think it was actually in a book called -- it's one of the career mailers for women in the business world, who was to be labeled going (inaudible).

Lesley W. Brunet

57:19

Yes.

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Lesley W. Brunet

00:06

So have the goals of the organization, although it's changed, WFO, WFAO. Now it's OFW, Organization For Women?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

00:20

Organization For Women. It changed character dramatically when it became an organization for women and administrators, and then it was open to all of the women in the institution. I have not been active in that since the original change occurred, because it completely changed the character of the organization. Not that it was a bad change, but it wasn't -- you know, my focus is really women faculty, and what happens when you have women administrators is that the administrators far outnumber the faculty participants, and the issues that they have to address and the issues that they face are quite different.

Lesley W. Brunet

01:08

In what way?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

01:10

The women faculty are at the beck and call of their department chairs. They answer to department chairs, their career success is totally dependent on their department chairs, all of them, pretty much all of them. They have to get promoted on a regular schedule, they need to get tenure in the institution. So the demands on them are -- the demands on doctors in general are quite different from administrators. So my feeling is that the organization was not -- was no longer really serving the needs. I mean it was good for women in the institution, but it was not focused on what my group was.

Lesley W. Brunet

02:02

So are the women faculty not really in it? Are any of them involved with the Organization For Women?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

02:08

I think there are a few. I do think there are a few, but it has a much broader agenda.

Lesley W. Brunet

02:15

And so really, Dr. Travis is more of the center of the faculty group.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

02:23

Yes.

Lesley W. Brunet

02:33

Will it help if we have a woman president or not? I'm not sure.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

02:39

Will it help women in the institution? It makes a statement to the outside world that this is a women friendly institution.

Lesley W. Brunet

02:47

Oh, I mean if we have a woman -- country.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

02:49

Oh, President of the United States.

Lesley W. Brunet

02:51

Yes, president of the country. Oh sure, if we had a woman president.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

02:54

No, I don't think so. No. Academia (inaudible) Senator Clinton.

Lesley W. Brunet

03:07

That's why the battles are so ugly, or something like that.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

03:09

It's because the stakes are so low. (laughs)

Lesley W. Brunet

03:13

I don't agree with that here. Maybe at U of H.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

03:17

Yes, at the university level.

Lesley W. Brunet

03:21

I know you had another appointment at 3:30. Thanks for taking the time today. You've really --

Margaret Kripke, PhD

03:30

I'll be happy to continue if you would like to do that. You can look at what I've written and see if there are some other questions that you have. And I'll think about what kinds of things you wanted some help with.

Lesley W. Brunet

03:44

OK. Or suggestions of people I should interview. Obviously there's Travis at the Swan, (inaudible). I've interviewed some of the women faculty.

Margaret Kripke, PhD

04:04

Jan Bruner [oral history interview
has been the longest (overlapping dialogue) of the current leadership.

Lesley W. Brunet

04:11

Did she ever work with Baylor?

Margaret Kripke, PhD

04:13

I don't know.

Lesley W. Brunet

04:18

I'll go ahead and stop this now.

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