

# QUARTERLY NEWS

## from WiSTEE Connect

Winter 2020

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### **SAVE THE DATE – 13 SEPTEMBER 2020**

The 5<sup>th</sup> Global Women of Light Symposium that will be held on 13 September, 2020 in Washington, DC, concurrently with OSA's Frontiers in Optics Conference. We look forward to seeing you there! A follow up invite with registration details will be sent this summer.

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### **WiSTEE Connect looks back 4<sup>th</sup> Global Women of Light Symposium**



WiSTEE Connect (Women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Entrepreneurship) hosted the 4<sup>th</sup> Global Women of Light Symposium on September 15, 2019 at the Optical Society headquarters in Washington, DC. Approximately 80 people from 15 different countries were in attendance, spanning all career levels in industry, academia and government.

## THE EVENT

### *Important updates from OSA*

Elizabeth Rogan, CEO of the Optical Society (OSA), kicked off the meeting by providing an update on the initiatives OSA has launched to help advance women. OSA is committed to including more women by 2021 in several target areas, including senior members, award and fellow nominations, award committees, governance, invited speakers, editors and meeting attendees. OSA also launched an initiative against harassment. Harassment consists of unwanted, unwelcome and uninvited behavior that demeans, threatens or offends another. Partnering with SPIE, OSA conducted a survey on harassment, receiving 2,200 responses. A policy was adopted for facilitating reporting of harassment at professional meetings.

### *Introduction by WiSTEE Connect Founder and Chair*

#### *Dr. Jie Qiao*



Qiao, Associate Professor at the Rochester Institute of Technology and Founder and Chair of WiSTEE Connect, introduced the vision and activities of WiSTEE Connect, an organization providing cross-disciplinary, cross-career-stage and cross-university mentorship, connectivity, and leadership opportunities to women aspiring to succeed in science and entrepreneurship. It aims to help women faculty members, students, engineers, and entrepreneurs to gain regional connections and global impact in the STEM field.

Dr. Qiao reported on surveys indicating that 76% of women in STE are eager to be promoted, yet the majority of women in technology end up quitting at mid-career. Entrepreneurial spirit, strategy and skills are

required for women to survive and reinvent themselves. It takes 20 years to change a culture of an organization, therefore today's discussion is centered on strategies to survive and thrive in an imperfect system.

### *Students*

A number of students benefitted from the generosity of the sponsors that supported their attendance. Sponsors for the 4<sup>th</sup> Global Women of Light Symposium included OSA Foundation, Thorlabs, Aktiwave, Towneley Capital Management, the Chester Center for Imaging Sciences (Rochester Institute of Technology), and The Institute of Optics (University of Rochester).



### *A Panel Discussion*

Four esteemed panelists included **Dr. Linda Braun**, Vice President of Photonics Solutions for the National Security and Innovative Solutions sector of CACI International; **Dr. Gisele Bennett**, Senior Vice President for Research and Professor in Electrical and Computer Engineering at Florida Tech; **Dr. Amy Newbury**, Director and Aerospace Fellow at Maxar Technologies; **Dr. Deborah Jackson**, Program Director, the US National Science Foundation Engineering Research Center; and Cynthia Simmons, the Chief of the Instrument Systems & Technology Division in the Engineering and Technology Directorate at NASA Goddard Space Flight Center. Their discussion centered on “Career Strategies for Women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Entrepreneurship.”



*Panelists (left to right): Gisele Bennett, Cynthia Simmons, Linda Braun, Deborah Jackson, and Amy Newbury.*

The panelists were asked to give their definition of success, and their responses resonated with the audience.

*“Happiness...satisfaction with what you are doing...having a positive influence on your chosen field...being challenged every day...being respected”*

A panelist expressed how realizing that her definition of success was different from men’s definition helped her redefine her priorities.

#### *Career advice*

The panelists also offered practical advice on how to develop one’s career, which included producing high quality work to establish credibility, being humble and resilient, and adapting to the culture of the organization you’re working in. You will meet people who have negative impression of you; invest six months in establishing a relationship with them, but if they don’t change their mind in that time, they won’t change their mind, and your energy is better spent elsewhere. Panelists also expressed the importance of building trust, because typically women won’t be able to change role as often as men. Learning how to ask questions will also help you advance.

#### *Bias, strategic thinking*

The discussion covered biases, and the importance of educating people who exhibit them. Realize you will always have unconscious bias; if you spend time hating that bias it is wasted energy. Ignore it, don’t let it consume your thoughts, and instead focus on what the other person needs to take the stress of their back. Being in a male dominated field you

experience skepticism. You can get motivated from this and turn something that is negative into a positive.

The panelists offered the advice to become a strategic thinker, because your energy is limited. You have to choose your battles. Think about the message you are sending, and what is going to be the return. Be guided by the things you absolutely need to be happy. Practical tips on how to improve confidence and leadership skills were also offered. Men always shake hands; women often don't know how to greet each other (handshake or hug) - to be professional always shake hands. Taking a leadership course can help to learn how to project confidence.

### *Mentors*

The important role of mentors was discussed. Panelists suggested picking someone who looks like they are ahead of you in what you want to become; even if they are not comfortable being your mentor, you can still ask them questions. Getting a mentor younger than you can help you to understand younger generations' needs.

Try to make yourself indispensable for your organization and the person you work for; in time they will become your best advocate.

### *Work/life*

Great advice was offered on work-life balance: understand what works for you and set your boundaries. It may be different in different seasons of life. Recognize that you can't do everything yourself. You need a support network. Invest in yourself- family, a hobby, travel, whatever makes you happy: if you are happier your career will benefit. Do your best, and whatever the outcome don't beat yourself up, don't dwell on it. Learning what is really important and what is really urgent. Learning to delegate and empower your staff to take on tasks is important. Communicate the expectations (e.g., no working during the weekend unless it's an emergency)

### *OSA scholarships*

After a networking lunch, Chad Stark, Executive Director of the OSA Foundation, highlighted some scholarships, travel grants and workshop opportunities to consider for 2020. These include the Milton Chang pivoting fellowship, the Brad Deutsch fellowship, the Career accelerator for optical communications, Corning Women in optical communications

travel grants, and more information can be found at <https://www.osa.org/en-us/foundation/grants/>.



The discussion continued with a roundtable discussion led by invited speakers. Different career paths in industry - technical (engineer to senior scientist) and management – were discussed. To excel in the technical path, you have to be eager to learn new things, have good communication, and be willing to take challenges. It is important to be a mentor to younger colleagues.



The differences in work/life balance depending on the career sector were also discussed. Academia and government lab are more flexible than industry. Government labs can be very rigid, due to bureaucracy, but allow for work/life balance: more freedom in personal life but not a lot of freedom in your research. Academia is demanding but allows flexibility.

### *Young faculty*

Important advice was offered to young faculty: document everything, especially for teaching, so you have proof of your performance.

Dr. Valerie Newman offered some medical advice on managing stress. Some stress is good if it challenges one to go beyond one's abilities, but if it is chronic it is bad stress and leads to burnout. Seek activities to destress. Having a sense of purpose is important and will get you through the hard times.



The program concluded with informal networking.

The feedback received on the program clearly shows how the messages expressed resonated with the audience, and helped combat the sense of isolation women so often face. Here are some examples.

From an assistant professor:

*“It was the first WISTEE event I attended and I enjoyed every part of it. As a new assistant professor, I found the panel discussions and presentations extremely valuable. I really appreciated the program that was organized and planned and I will definitely attend next year.”*

From a first year graduate student:

*“The whole day was filled with advice and reminders from established and knowledgeable women. In particular, the panel of women with varied and extensive careers taught me a lot. It was full of affirmations that I am smart enough to be where I am, and I can make myself happy in my career. It was also full of practical information that I hadn’t necessarily thought of before.*

*I’m glad that I attended the WiSTEE symposium in my first year of graduate school. This is the first time in four years that I’ve had to adjust to a new setting, and this conference helped me set the tone: I am good enough to be in this program, I can excel in my program, and I can’t let anyone get me down.”*

From a third-year undergraduate student:

*“I have been to multiple events about women in STEM before, but I have never experienced one quite like WiSTEE. It was truly inspiring to hear the first panel with Cynthia Simmons, sharing her experience transitioning from military, to motherhood and to NASA. The Q&A was really interesting to listen to as well, to hear women from so many different aspects of STEM, and how they navigated through their career was interesting, and made me think about what to expect once I graduate.”*

Sincerely,

Cristina Canavesi, WiSTEE Secretary

Jie Qiao, WiSTEE Chair & President

<http://www.wisteeconnect.org/>

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