
The American Association of Immunologists Oral History Project

Transcript

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friends' fathers were Harvard professors, but I was the Ted Williams Professor, who we felt as Bostonians was the greatest hitter certainly that ever lived.

This gets a little more personal. My daughter grew up in Boston. I expected that she would go to college in Boston. This is now 2000, and she sat me down and she said, "Dad, you know, I have to leave Boston."

I said, "Why?"

And she said, "Because I have an overbearing father." [laughs] So she went off to Princeton.

I got a call from NYU [New York University] that they needed to reinvigorate their cancer center and were going to put tens of millions of dollars into it. But what was interesting, there was also an opening to run what's called the Skirball Institute. This is a basic science institute. Dan Littman was there. And I guess I had the idea that integrating a basic science institute with cancer would be an interesting challenge, and clearly it was. Again, we built new research buildings and clinical buildings, were able to bring people like Dan Littman and others, who

Mount Sinai has created this huge network of seven hospitals, so it's the fifth or sixth largest cancer center in the country at this point. I see that as a responsibility, an opportunity to provide clinical trials to many more patients. We're seeing now over ten thousand new patients a year. As I mentioned before, cancer is a disease of aging, so we have a continual fight on our hands, but we really do have the armamentarium to do something about this now. So it's just a great time.

speaker—somebody came up to me afterwards and said, “You know, I feel that when an immunologist speaks, there should be subtitles for the immunologically impaired.” And, you know, it is kind of true. What happens in each field, especially in clinical medicine, you develop nomenclature, and things only come about when you begin to develop a common language, even between scientific disciplines. But immunologists are among the worst, you know, are the worst. [laughs] Partly because we have so many molecules that are studied. I mean, thank God for Google or whatever. You can look up CD134 in a second to remind yourself of what it is. [laughs]

Williams: What about major disappointments in your scientific career? Did you run up against a big bump at any point?

Burakoff: I wouldn't say I've had major disappointments. I thought at one time—and I was a candidate to be a dean at several medical schools. That didn't work out, but I'm sure to some extent it was also my fault. I realize I would have been a terrible dean, partly because I really am passionate about doing something about cancer, really coming from the kids, and I'm extraordinarily tolerant to support all aspects, from outreach studies to community, I mean if it advances the field of cancer and brings treatments to people.

Disappoint? I don't know, you know, the question you ask yourself, but your life doesn't give you do-overs. When I come to the AAI, for example, somebody like Linda Sherman, people who loved immunology and have stuck with it for years and years, you kind of say, “Well, could I have achieved more in immunology if I hadn't had now a good part of my energies diverted? Would that have been more satisfying?” I kind of don't know.

I always joke maybe I have a little bit too much ADD [attention deficit disorder]. I still wake up in the morning, bounce out of bed, and this is after a lot of years. So the disappointment would be to say, “Gee, you know, I would have liked to have known what it was like if I took that different path.” Reminds me of a great interview with Warren Buffet. He's now eighty-four. He said, “I appreciate I'm going to die in time, but, goddamn it, I would love to know what's going to happen in the next thirty or forty years.” He said, “That's where I feel cheated.” And to some extent, you kind of ask yourself, “What would it have been like if I'd stayed more focused on immunology? How might I have evolved?” I love the fact that it's become more applied now. But, you know, I don't have a lot of complaints.

Williams: I was thinking, too, of maybe a line of research that started out being very promising and then ended up a dead end.

Burakoff: Oh, well, that was the second year. [laughs] That was the year—now broken out. It was a point in time with Benacerraf where we were trying to study what were called suppressor cells. Today I think those are what people call T regulatory

cells. We didn't really have the molecular techniques to define them well enough. There were experiments that worked and didn't work. Never really worked well for me. It was part of the time I went to Benacerraf, you know, looking for some emotional support, which I didn't get. [laughs]

But I think it's just more about could you have done more than big disappointment. Although I must admit I've been pretty lucky, you know, coming from a middle-class background, and I think my parents were just happy I went to college and not jail, you know. Medical school was fine, but it was just to keep me out of Vietnam. Finding Tony Fauci, who we still kind of joke. I don't see him very often. He's pretty busy. So I feel pretty lucky. Great family. In my family, they point out, I play a doctor. My brother's a real doctor. He heads Clinical Gastroenterology at the Brigham Hospital. My daughter's doing a fellowship in pediatric emergency room, and she wants to save the world. She goes to Laos every year. She spent a year in Laos. We have pretty good health, you know. My career has gone well.

Williams: Was it just you and your brother?

Burakoff: It was just me and my brother. My brother always wanted to be a doctor. I thought that was the stupidest thing in the world. [laughs]

Williams: Let's turn to AAI for a moment. When did you first join?

Burakoff: I thought I joined AAI like by 1976, something like that. [Ed. Burakoff joined AAI in 1978.]

Williams: That was pretty early in your career.

Burakoff: Pretty early. In fact, I remember it [AAI annual meeting] used to be in Atlantic City, and even then Atlantic City was not a spectacular place to go to. I remember that first year, because we were studying how this molecule complement can punch holes in cells and make them basically explode, and it couldn't do it to certain tumor cells, and published a paper, and I was giving a talk, one of these short talks at AAI [annual meeting]. I still remember I was terrified. I was up the whole night, the whole night. [laughs] I was pretty shy.

recommended me, and I ran it for several years [1984–1986]. I remember Tony's

United States is still the closest thing to a meritocracy. I have lots of friends in France. If you want to go to medical school in France, everyone takes an exam at the end of high school, like when they're eighteen, and the 10 percent that pass it go to medical school, and the rest never go to medical school there. We have so

because of me, now is doing a fellowship in New York. So I've had a very supportive family.

Williams: Michele [Hogan] had told me about the time when you turned down coming to NIH because you wanted to have time to drive your daughter to and from school.

Burakoff: To be honest, I think it was Penn, but I don't remember where it was. So what was wonderful—it is true, I traveled a lot. But it turned out my daughter went to a private school in the Harvard Medical School complex. She was angry at me. I kind of made her go. It was a school for only young girls. And I was always cognizant of how tough it was for women in science, not that she should decide to go into science. But because it was in the Longwood area, when I was in town we would drive in together, listen to Monty Python. [laughs] We knew all the Monty Python songs, and that was really terrific. When I was home and I didn't travel that much, but I probably traveled too much, our daughter's a—I mean she's fortunate she has a doting mother and a father who she knew cared, even if I was in the lab or in God knows where sometimes. But it was true, driving her to school, it's memorable for both of us. We could still sing you some of the Monty Python songs. [laughs] Or tell you the story about the dead parrot if you're interested. [laughs]

Williams: I don't think we have quite the time. [laughs] Over the years, what have you done for fun? What kind of recreational pursuits?

Burakoff: Well, I actually like to play tennis, but I've got to keep my day job. [laughs] But we do a lot of traveling and we try to do it relatively exotically. I think my wife wants to be sure that people can't get to me. So we actually came back about a month ago from a trip through Cambodia and Saigon, met up with our daughter there, went on a trip on the Mekong Delta. The year before, we were in Myanmar. I think the year before that we took a safari in Tanzania. The year before that, we were in Patagonia and Chile. So that's kind of fun to do.

Williams: Did your wife pursue a career as well or—

Burakoff: She worked as an editor in a company when I was in medical school, and then when we went up to Boston, she actually went back and studied first at Brandeis and then at Harvard in archaeology of the Middle East and got to that point where she didn't write her Ph.D. That's when we had our daughter. Actually was writing children's books which were set in the Middle East. And actually in 1978, she spent three months at a dig in Susa, which is on the Iraq-Iranian border. Her parents spoke French, so she speaks French well. This was around New Year's and we had a big New Year's party, partly to celebrate her going off, and she was leaving for three months. I had dinner invitations every night for three months, because no one thought I would survive without her. [laughs] She had to fly into Tehran herself, take a train all the way down to the south of Iran, be on a dig for three months. They didn't worry about her one bit. It was whether I would survive. [laughs]

Williams: You were in New York on 9/11 [2001].

Burakoff: Yes.

Williams: Did that have impact?

Burakoff: Enormous impact. In fact, my wife, when we first came, at NYU they have apartment buildings on Washington Square, and they were renovating one of the apartments, so she was at Washington Square, which is less than a mile, when the two towers came down. And she had to walk up—I was at that point living above what's called the Skirball Institute. They have apartments above that. n f42(a4(ha)4B)7(o(i)-2(r)

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