



Personal Challenge, Shared Triumph

Victoria Yavelsky is an ovarian cancer researcher focused on innovative methods for early detection and treatment of the disease, the fifth most common form of cancer. She is also a gynecological cancer survivor. When she first learned of the UNESCO-L'Oréal Fellowship, Victoria believed her story would resonate with the grant's mission to facilitate new research possibilities for deserving young women scientists. It did.

Rising out of Disaster

Victoria's career path is no less than remarkable—particularly because it was, inadvertently, set in motion by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. At the time, a pregnant Victoria was living in nearby Kiev in the Ukraine. She and her physician parents were recruited to help treat the Chernobyl victims. In just 48 hours, Victoria and her unborn son became victims too. They were exposed to high levels of radiation, which would change their lives. Victoria, a single parent, was urged to take her son, Alex, born underweight and with difficulty breathing, to a better climate after his birth. She decided to move to Israel because of her Jewish heritage.

Despite the difficult move, Victoria first sought training as a nurse to earn the money necessary to pursue graduate training in molecular biology at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Israel. She completed a Master's degree, but fell ill as she began her Ph.D. She soon learned that she had a gynecological malignancy—possibly a consequence of her radiation exposure. Once she recovered, Victoria chose to focus her dissertation research on the disease that almost killed her.

Eagerly Investigating

In 2003, Victoria won the UNESCO-L'Oréal Fellowship. Professionally, the collaborations gained through the award proved pivotal to her career. While her focus was always on ovarian cancer, she says the money allowed her to pursue her work in grander ways. “The fel-

lowship essentially enabled the globalization of my research so that I could work with the upper echelon of great scientific minds, which has had a lasting impact on my career and myself personally,” she says. In particular, collaborative work with German scientists Michael Pfreundschuh and Dieter Preuss, both oncologists at Saarland University Medical School in Homburg, facilitated her research efforts to identify cancer-specific antigens that prompt an immune system response—and therefore, could potentially be used as a diagnostic test of early-stage cancer. The work's commercial potential was recognized and promoted by Gerald Chan, a US-based radiation biologist turned biotechnology investor who is one of many proponents of early cancer diagnostics as the best way to significantly increase cancer survival rates.

Being introduced to ideas and techniques from collaborators around the world helped Victoria identify and study mechanisms for slowing the spread of cancer cells. In addition to her work as a researcher at Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Victoria is eagerly investigating ways to engineer antibody-producing cells, in collaboration with Leslie Lobel, as a senior investigator at a drug development company called Docoop Technologies in Israel.

Emotional and Moral Support

While the professional relationships that developed in recent years have shaped her career development, so have the more personal ones. “The fellowship also helped me forge many close professional relationships, in particular with other women scientists—including my graduate advisers, Michal Shapira and Marina Wolfson, and the current president of the university, Rivka Carmi—who offered me much-needed emotional and moral support to overcome the many obstacles in my path,” says Victoria. “My parents and son, too, were pivotal in enabling my success as they believed in me and supported my dreams.”

The fellowship holds special significance for Victoria—perhaps because she could have benefited from her own research. “I think that there needs to be a greater focus on diseases of women, and in particular, the malignant diseases,” she says. Ovarian cancer, for example, is called the silent or whispering disease because its vague symptoms are often overlooked or misdiagnosed until it becomes more advanced.

‘Incentive for the Uphill Struggle’

In addition, Victoria says the fellowship emboldened her desire to overcome the work-life challenges that women pursuing a scientific career often face. “The L'Oréal fellowship is extremely important because it acknowledges that women, who typically raise children during the course of their careers, need an extra incentive for the uphill struggle they face to define and achieve their research goals,” she says.

Victoria's career success exemplifies that women scientists are able to achieve their goals despite the expected—and even unexpected—difficulties balancing a professional and personal life, and can turn that recognition into greater reward.



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