

Biography

As a descendent of an indentured servant on the Mayflower that sailed from England in 1620, as well as a Cherokee survivor of the Trail of Tears in 1838, I am as American as you can get. For the last 500 years, each generation of my ancestry seems to have married someone as different from themselves as they could find. My ethnic background is so diverse that I cannot soundly identify with any nationality. I was born in Oklahoma, but at age 10 I moved to the Caribbean island of St. Croix in the US Virgin Islands. My accent and my skin color were different from almost everyone I went to school with, yet I never had a difficult time making friends. My family's attitude toward others was that people are people, regardless of background, and we all share in the human condition of having insecurities, jealousies, false pride, and mad passions. Even though we might find ourselves on different rungs of the social status ladder, we all have value and our positions on that ladder can change at any moment. I am still trying to wrap my head around recent efforts to redefine the American spirit as one that excludes entire nationalities of people. While it is easy to latch onto the negative qualities of those who oppose our values, the better way to move forward is to bring out the best qualities in others when we can and work to give everyone an equal opportunity in life.

Education has always been held in high regard in my family, but it was not something many of us had access to. Both my maternal and paternal grandmothers were the first in their families to learn to read and write in English. My father was the oldest child in his family, and he dropped out of high school to work full-time to care for his younger brothers and sister. My mom graduated from high school, and attended college part-time, but never completed a degree. I am the first in my family to complete a bachelor's degree. As my mother hung my graduation portrait from Oklahoma State on the wall, she looked at me and told me she expected to see my Master's and Doctorate's portraits there next. I know for certain that she had no idea what either of those degrees meant or the sacrifice involved to achieve them, but her words gave me the freedom to pursue them. A few years after that, we added my picture from my MS degree in Biotechnology from Texas A&M University.

I thought I was done with school, and was ready to earn a paycheck and enjoy married life. I completed a 10-week internship at Monsanto (yes, the evil Fortune 500 company) in St. Louis to fulfill the requirements for my Master's degree in time for graduation in May, and a permanent position was being created for me. Coming from two schools focused on agricultural research, designing commercial products to improve crop yield seemed like a better use of my time for solving the problem of world hunger than continuing my education in doctoral studies. I was ready to create something of value to the first person who gave me the opportunity. Even though I had a position lined up to begin in September, it would not be guaranteed until August when the annual budget was approved. Not at all satisfied with 3 months of uncertainty, by July I began a new position as a Research Assistant in the Neurology department at Washington University in St. Louis. I was the first hire in Dr. Kotzbauer's lab studying Parkinson's disease, which was adjacent to Dr. Holtzman's lab studying Alzheimer's disease. For two years I was in heaven, loving every second of the environment of intense study of the brain. And then I realized that I was not a student anymore, but wanted to be. After growing up in the Caribbean, it was time to make a big change. I decided that my family's loyalty to the extreme, icy climate of Oklahoma and Missouri was perplexing, especially since it was land we had been forced to live on only a few generations prior. I secured a spot in the graduate program at the UT Health Science Center in San Antonio, which was only a 3-hour drive from the Gulf Coast and my husband's family.

Graduate school was cut-throat, and inadequate funding meant that not all of us would graduate. When my father was diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer at the beginning of my second year of my PhD, he forbid me from withdrawing from school. It meant too much for all of us, and he wanted to see me finish my dream. I never withdrew while he was still alive, but a year after he passed, I was struggling to keep up with the demanding pace and was forced to take a time out. I worked in industry developing commercial diagnostic tests for human disease while I healed, but the work was not challenging enough. A few years later, I returned to graduate school one last time to definitively complete my doctorate. After 5 years in the laboratory of Dr. Jokūbas Žiburkus, I defended my thesis on adenosine treatment in a mouse model of Dravet syndrome, one of the most severe types of epilepsies identified. Three weeks after defending, I began my postdoctoral studies at Baylor College of Medicine doing translational research on the human genetics of epilepsy. After two years, I was promoted to Research Associate, and I am continuing my work developing new diagnostic methods of epilepsy patients to understand the complex genetics of somatic mutations that contribute to disease susceptibility and pharmacological outcome.