

Interview with Liesl Folks

Q: Describe a typical day in your life.

A: I have a new role this year, as Dean of Engineering and Applied Sciences at the University at Buffalo, which is tremendously exciting. Because I am transitioning from industry to academia, I have a steep learning curve, so my days are packed with meetings with key stakeholders in the university and the community. I am looking forward to figuring out my new job well enough that I can get back to a more measured pace! However, it is just wonderful being back in academia again, with the opportunity to interact with students at all levels on a regular basis, and to be surrounded by cutting-edge innovations and ideas.

Q: What are your leisurely interests and activities?

A: I love the outdoors, so love hiking, biking, swimming, skiing. At home, I like to cook and read, and messing about with my two children, building with Lego or playing games.

Q: Choose one word you feel explains you best.

A; On the positive side, 'energetic' (-: I'm can supply the negatives too, if you want them!

Q: What do you feel you are best known for?

A: I'd like to be known for mentoring and encouraging people to achieve all that they are capable of. I have a particular concern about the underrepresentation of women in engineering and the related sciences and I aspire to moving the needle on that issue!

Q: What is your favorite part of your job?

A: I'm loving all of it! The role of a Dean encompasses many facets of academic life, touching students, staff, faculty, alumni, industry partners, and governmental partners. Trying to figure out ways to help and encourage all these groups to succeed across the three missions of Teaching, Research and Service, is at the heart of my job. In parallel, we have to ensure strong coordination of all the activities to have an efficient organization.

Q: Who has encouraged you throughout your career and/or life? Inspired you?

A: My parents have been the most wonderful supporters throughout my life, and that has been a tremendous benefit to me. Just knowing I had their support at all stages has given me the courage to take on new challenges, and to be persistent. Like many of their generation, they were not able to attend college after high school, but were 100% supportive of me undertaking multiple degrees so that I could become a physicist.

Q: Did you have a mentor?

A: I have benefitted from great mentors at all stages in my studies and career. The most influential has been my PhD supervisor, Prof. Robert Street AO, at the University of Western Australia, who has been a tremendous mentor to me, and whose guidance remains relevant all these decades after my graduation. He has achieved astonishing things in his life, academically and in service roles, and all with consummate professionalism, good humor and good grace.

Q: How did you become affiliated with AVS?

A: As a physicist working in the highly interdisciplinary magnetic data storage industry, the AVS has provided a natural home for my interests. My research has spanned from basic science to technology development to



commercialization, and has included magnetic materials, interfaces, and processing topics. The AVS is a great organization because it brings all these diverse interests together to share knowledge and advance technology.

Q: Have you always wanted to be a member? What motivated you to join?

A: I guess most people, me included, quite reasonably join such organizations out of self-interest when we are young, for the networking opportunities. But for many of us, the motivation evolves as our careers advance, and we see and relish the opportunities to help others and build community.

Q: Do you belong to any other organizations?

A: I am currently the President of the IEEE Magnetics Society, which has about 3000 members worldwide. The objectives of that organization are directed towards building and sustaining a vibrant international community for those studying and working in the fields of magnetism and magnetic materials. I am also a member of the American Institute of Physics and of the Australian Institute of Physics.

Q: What was your reaction upon winning your award with AVS?

A: Delight!

What other awards or acknowledgements have you won recently?

A: It is not really an award or acknowledgement, but I was pleased to be part of the congressionally-mandated review panel that wrote the "Triennial Review of the National Nanotechnology Initiative", published last month by the National Academies Press;

http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=18271

Q: What has been your paramount experience with AVS?

A: The AVS Symposium experience is always terrific, with a confluence of people from industry and academia sharing new ideas and trying to figure out how to push the boundaries of our knowledge and capabilities. I know that a great group of people is working hard right now to put together the next of these meetings, which will be the 60th Symposium (!!), a truly remarkable achievement.

Q: What is the next big step in your career you plan on tackling?

A: Phew! I have only been in my current role for 4 months, so I am a long way from planning for the next step!

Q: If you could leave one piece of advice for our future generations, whether it is science related or not, what would it be?

A: "Say yes to opportunities when they present themselves!" I am often surprised at the opportunities that people say 'no' to, small and large, and how it limits their career trajectories. Even small opportunities can introduce us to new people and new perspectives, and these can so easily turn into the next big opportunity, especially if you have made a positive impression.

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