

How I Got Into Histology

By: Kelly Mallett



I was raised in a small central Texas town with a population of about 300, if that. . . I was the baby of five children. My sister, the oldest, is 10 years older than me. We went to the same school – the elementary was on one end, and the high school was on the exact opposite end. At that time I believe it was classified as a 1-A school. I grew up making good grades and hearing that I was smart enough that I could do anything I wanted to, I just had to make the decision and do it. I'm not sure I really believed that, after all, family and teachers are supposed to tell us things like that right? With that small history you can probably figure out that the only occupations that I seem to have known about when I was young were, doctor, lawyer, teacher, fireman, policeman... You get the idea.

So how did I get into histology...

When I'm asked that question, I usually answer with, "By the grace of God." He knew I was going to be a single mother and would raise two children essentially on my own. But when I realize people truly want to know how I got into Histology, I tell them the whole story:

Almost 30 years ago, when I was in my early twenties, I applied for a job as a secretary in the Veterinary Pathology department at Texas A&M University. I don't think I even considered preparing for the interview. It was one of the most embarrassing interviews I have ever had! One of the questions I was asked was, "Do you know what pathology is?" As I felt my face getting hot and turning red, I knew I had to admit that I did NOT know that answer. No one told me there would be a quiz! I think embarrassment was trying to give way to shame because it didn't occur to me that I might need to know something about the department in order to work there! Ugh! After tapping out that sentence it occurred to me that back then, regarding pathology, I was like most people are today, when they hear the word histology! Most of the time I can see their thoughts processing and the expression on their face as they are trying to deduce what histology might be... History? Tissues? Anyone reading this and chuckling knows exactly what I am referring to!

As it turns out, I got the job! I was the support staff for 8 pathologists and the histology lab supervisor. All the people I worked for would bring me their documents to type and format before mailing. The histology lab was in close proximity to my office. The supervisor would stop in at times to visit, even if she didn't have any work for me. One day, before she left my area, she got a little more serious than our usual boisterous laughing. As she was peering over the counter, she stated, "You should come to work in the histology lab." I'm not even sure I looked up before I waved her away with my hand as if to dismiss her, and I bluffed, "I can do what you do!"

I didn't have a CLUE what she did! I was just doing my job and keeping my people happy. Much to my surprise, a few weeks later, I was in the histology lab! Oh my gosh, what had I done?

I was the kid in chemistry that was raising her hand, NOT to see if I had balanced the equation, but to see if I had set it up correctly so I could try to balance it! On the first day of FFA (Future Farmers of America) in 9th grade, the Ag teacher told us that we would ALL have to castrate a pig. As soon as class was over, I walked straight to the school office and told them to change my schedule to FHA (Future Homemakers of America). There was no way I was castrating a pig, or anything else for that matter! However, I do remember being fascinated with dissecting a frog in my high school biology class...

I would later learn that my supervisor had to battle it out with the department head to get me transferred to the lab. His argument was, "She doesn't have the kind of personality to work in a lab. She's better in the front office." I guess I had what it took after all. I worked my two years and started gathering my supplies for the practical part of the HT exam. I fulfilled all the requirements at the time and submitted it. I passed!

I then scheduled the written exam. I danced out of that Sylvan Learning Center only to find out a bit later that I had failed the written part! I was mortified, as soon as I could re-schedule it, I did. After the second time I took the test, I walked out of the same Sylvan Learning Center in tears because I knew I failed it! I guessed at so many of those questions! I hung my head in shame and convinced that I would never amount to anything. I studied those books and felt like I knew the content inside and out. It was the most difficult test I had ever taken! Much to my surprise, I passed the second time around!

After finishing my Bachelor's degree at Texas A&M University in 2005, and getting my Texas Teacher's certification, I would still argue that the HT exam was the most difficult exam I have ever taken. That was almost 30 years ago. I've worked in several different labs, veterinary and human. During my three year teaching career, I still worked PRN and part-time as a histologist. In 2010, the circle was completed as I was hired to be the histology supervisor of the same lab in which I was trained all those years ago.

That's how I got into histology. It has afforded me many opportunities that I may never have gotten if I hadn't pursued this career path, I guess it really was by the grace of God and His master plan for my life.