National Society for Histotechnology
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How I Got Into Histology: The "Donnasaur" Story
By: Donna March

My name is Donna March and I was born and raised in Washington, D.C., and my story of how I got into the histology profession is a very unique story. First of all, I want to mention that I have a total of five ASCP certifications: HT (Histotechnician), HTL (Histotechnologist), CT (Cytotechnologist), PBT (Phlebotomist) and MLT (Medical Laboratory Technician). I am still on my journey, getting ready to start my clinical rotations for an online Medical Laboratory Science Program, I've been pursuing part-time for several years. My journey began in histology and will also end in the field of Anatomical Pathology (AP), since I still have 15 years before I'm eligible for retirement benefits from the civil service.

Once upon a time, I was a student at University of Maryland, College Park, preparing to gain acceptance into nursing school at the young age of 19. The Nursing Programs were very competitive during the late 80's, and my grades were substandard. I was working approximately 30 hours a week as a Dialysis technician, getting burned out by the long hours and hostile patients. One day, as I was leaving my school counselor's office, I saw a memo on the wall advertising a Student-Intern position at the National Museum of Health and Medicine (NMHM), at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology (AFIP), 6900 Georgia Ave, NW, Washington, D.C. I quickly applied became a part-time civil servant working in the Plastination Laboratory, above the museum level.

Plastination is a tissue preservation technique developed by Gunther von Hagens, the same person who is known for televised autopsy dissects. While I was working at AFIP as a student-intern in 1990, they sent my Supervisor to Germany to learn the Plastination technique and acquire the proper materials to start the process at AFIP. The Plastination procedure was patented by von Hagens, and the materials could only be purchased by him. The process is very similar to our histology tissue processing technique, but different percentages of acetone are used in addition to formalin, at almost freezing temperatures. Since I lived very close to AFIP at that time, I monitored the process during the weekends, so my Supervisor would not have to make the commute from her living quarters in Baltimore.

My Supervisor was dating an Air Force Histopathology Technician, whom she later married. I expressed my frustrations with getting accepted into a Nursing Program to him and he suggested that I apply to the Tri-Service School of Histopathology, which was also located on the museum level at AFIP. He also said the program lasted only six months, and after completion, I should be able to get a job anywhere in the world. And he was right! I have worked as a Histotech in DC, Hawaii, Florida and Illinois and as an AP Manager in New York.

The Tri-Service School of Histopathology accepted two civilians per class, along with ten Air Force and Navy students, and consisted of one Navy instructor and two Air Force instructors. Admission into the program was not easy. I was interviewed by an Air Force officer, a Navy Chief and an Army officer. I still had my lab coat on from working in the Plastination Laboratory, and by the time the interview ended, my arm pits in the lab coat were soaked with sweat from being nervous. Two weeks later I heard from

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the admission office, saying I was one of the civilian applicants chosen, and I would be attending school from 0600 to 1430, five days a week, with a GS-3 paid salary and full-time benefits starting 23 July 1991.

This was the second leg of my journey into the laboratory profession and my first introduction to assisting autopsies, grossing, embedding human and animal tissue, manual staining of tissue sections, microtomy of tissue blocks on AO microtomes, making glue slides (salinized slides and positive charged slides came later) and both manual / automated tissue processing. The Miles Sakura Finetek Tissue-Tek automated tissue processor has been there from the beginning. Those tissue processors will last until the end of time. I've seen one in almost every laboratory I've worked, tucked away in storage, being used as a backup tissue processor.

Even though we were using disposal blades during that time, in school we were taught to sharpen non-disposal knives with the "stropping and honing" technique. I'm not sure if there are many histotechs still working out there that remember this being performed in the histology laboratory. I have not seen or heard of it since I was in histo school. Before, we use to receive hazardous pay for working in the histology laboratory as a federal employee. They no longer provide that pay because they're saying the PEL of chemicals used in the histology lab meet the required standards of safety. That is definitely true for those labs who are using xylene substitutes.

There isn't a stain I can't remove in the histology laboratory from the floor. Been there; done that! I remember making hematoxylin, giemsa and eosin from scratch. Those dyes were like blood in a crime scene. I once worked in histology laboratory in Hawaii, where I had to keep the windows open for awhile after making Giemsa, since the dye was all over the floor in tiny specs, and I had to apply alcohol and bleach until it was spotless.

It was not until later, when I was working in the Consultation laboratory at AFIP, that I realized the importance of that atomic bombproof building where I was groomed and where my histology career began. We received tissue blocks from all over the world, and the goal was to provide wrinkle-free tissue sections for world renowned pathologists who worked at AFIP. The old "green AFIP manual" was our bible. I presently own a copy which I later acquired from them when I knew that they were closing. One of the oldest memories I have of AFIP, is hearing about Lee Luna, the Father of Histology, who was once a janitor there and later owned his own lab. It was a very sad and quiet day, when Mr. Luna's funeral took place in 1992. I was one of the few civilian histotechs working that day since I had never met and only heard stories about that legend.

When I started at AFIP in December 1991 as a Histopathology Technician, GS-5 civilian at AFIP, I was the new kid on the "block". I had the Dinosaurs teaching me and paving the way for the histology of tomorrow. I remember when I use to go to Elbert Gaffney's church and listen to him play the piano. He was the creator of Gaffney's One Hour Giemsa, which can be found in the "red AFIP manual". I also recalled witnessing Dick Gregory protesting on the steps of AFIP when Ron Brown's autopsy x-rays went missing. I also remember working in the basement at AFIP, and the lounge where we ate lunch was rumored to be the place where Abraham Lincoln's autopsy was performed.

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This “Me too” movement is reminding me of a time when I was a young unexperienced histotech, naïve about life, and I wore jean mini-skirts and tights in the histology lab. All throughout that day at AFIP, the older men were chanting, “Donna has on a mini-skirt today’. I was so embarrassed and humiliated. Sexual harassment was not enforced like it is today. And I also remember working at AFIP around the same time as the Anita Hill vs. Clarence Thomas case. We listened to it live in the lab on the radio, because that was well before the time of the internet.

Another fond memory is of my then Chief of Scientific Laboratories, Arnicia Downing, and my previous Supervisor Debbie McElroy, who were working on the new “red AFIP manual.” They too were legends and I will always remember the mentoring I received from them. I received a call from Ms. McElroy before she passed away in 2010, saying she think she acquired some type of blood cancer from working with xylene. “Rest in peace” Debbie. You have showed us the way and you were the perfect Histotech and Cytotech. That was when I decided to start my education towards becoming a Clinical Pathology health profession, providing me a break from the chemicals in the histology laboratory.

I am currently working as a Medical Lab Technician in the Blood Bank, Donor Testing Center, at Tripler Army Medical Center. I do plan on working in AP in the future. Most military facilities hire Medical Technologists/Medical Laboratory Scientists/Clinical Laboratory Scientists as AP Supervisors. I am en route to being eligible to take the MLS (ASCP) exam in February 2020. Let us continue to spread positive information and knowledge about the field so we the new dinosaurs, can inspire and lend a helping hand to our younger histotechs. My heart will always lie in histology….I hope to see everyone in New Orleans at the HistoConvention in September 2019.