

FOCUS ON A FELLOW: DR. BRENDA RUSSELL

KASIA PLACHTA

Dr. Brenda Russell is a Professor of Physiology, Biophysics, Bioengineering and Medicine, and Executive Associate Vice Chancellor for Research. She was recruited as an Honors College Fellow shortly after arriving at UIC in 1988. Although kept busy with the demands of research and collaborative efforts both on campus and abroad, Dr. Russell finds time to interact with her Honors College students in personal and thought-provoking ways. Many times I nearly forgot to get her signature on forms because I became so absorbed in the conversation. After these visits, it became apparent that Dr. Russell is a “human-interested” person – someone interested in others’ success as much as her own. When a former student ran through the rain from east to west campus to tell her about his medical school acceptance, she enthusiastically shared in his excitement. This genuine interest in students is one of many qualities that make Dr. Russell a great Fellow.

As a young student, Dr. Russell already had this enthusiastic approach to life and learning. In grammar school, she took two coinciding language classes, Latin and German, because just one wasn’t enough. After secondary school, she decided to attend the University of London, despite her family’s objection. She wanted to study physics, but the department was not admitting women. Unaffected, she joined the physiology department instead. Shortly after, she had to change departments again because she met and married a colleague, which was not allowed since university policy did not approve of spouses working together. As a result, she began working in an anatomy lab, which taught her more about the structure of living things. In 1971, Dr. Russell received her Ph.D. in Physiology.

Several years later, Dr. Russell was in California, this time as a post-doctorate researching muscle adaptation at UCLA. Although university policy had prevented her from studying physics, Dr. Russell never lost her knack for it. The UCLA lab received an electron microscope to view muscle tissue samples, but the anatomist did not know how to use it. With her knowledge of electro-magnetic lenses, Dr. Russell was able to master the microscope’s components. Her ability to combine concepts of physics to physiology helped her gain the respect of her colleagues and became especially handy as bioengineering emerged as a new, exciting field of study.

In 1977, Dr. Russell and her husband moved to Chicago,



Dr. Brenda Russell (center), and her students from left to right: Matt Curtis, John Collins, Brenda Russell, Erik Swanson, Golna Doroudian, Chi Bang, and Anjolie Gang

along with their three kids, Ben, Emily, and Jill. Dr. Russell began working in Chicago as the Director of the Graduate Division of Cell Biology at Rush University, and shortly after welcomed her fourth child, Sally. In 1988, she arrived at UIC as a Professor of Physiology in the College of Medicine. Dr. Russell has since held several positions and taught students from many of the UIC graduate programs. Currently, Dr. Russell splits time between her office as Executive Associate Vice Chancellor for Research, and her lab as the director of two NIH-funded, collaborative

projects. One project studies cellular response to heart failure, and the other regeneration of cardiac tissue.

During my latest visit, Dr. Russell wore a triumphant grin on her face. She was explaining the difficulty in the use of antibodies in a recent experiment. Her lab produced conflicting results with published data. Results from previous research found a large amount of an essential protein at one location in cardiac cells, but when the Russell Lab reproduced the experiment using a more specific antibody, they instead found that the protein resides in other places. Both groups wanted to be right, but the dispute wasn't settled until a third party gave full support of Dr. Russell's findings. She was very excited about the news, saying, "I enjoy science, thinking, debate - I think this is fun!" Despite her victory and having every right to gloat, it was clear that the outcome was more thrilling as a strengthened discovery than a demonstration of superior method. She continued, "You always have a great respect for your colleagues." Dr. Russell takes true pleasure in the process and products of her work, not just from the laudatory perks that accompany it. She makes the most of opportunities, as is seen in her recent efforts in planning committee meetings, developing curriculum for a course on the ever-expanding study of stem cells, and helping in the organization of the Student Research Forum.

My hand couldn't write fast enough to keep pace with the interview, so I took a mental note to finally buy one of those voice recorders that everyone seems to use...and then lose in a lecture. Luckily, I remembered something Dr. Russell said in an earlier visit: "Life is not a race to see who will finish first."