

Starting from Scratch: WiSE Women at UNC Wilmington

Christy Visaggi

Over a year ago, I received an email regarding a fellowship in support of projects meant to increase female representation in scientific disciplines. My friend, Patti Mason, happened to be in the office at that moment, and for the first time, we discovered our shared enthusiasm for “women in science” causes. We began lamenting the fact that our university—the University of North Carolina at Wilmington (UNCW)—did not offer a mentoring program or support group for women in the sciences.

Before I go any further, I should warn you that both Patti and I are perpetually overcommitted in other campus organizations and by our own paleontological research. However, for some reason, creating a new group dedicated to women in science didn't faze us. It all started with an email... just to see if there was any interest in having such a network at UNC Wilmington. The response was overwhelming! Several students, staff, and faculty expressed interest in our idea and we were stuck. There was clearly a need for some sort of women in science organization, and who could better start it than us?

How do you start an organization from scratch anyway? Fortunately, our Campus Activities and Involvement Center is very supportive regarding logistics that need to be completed before being recognized by the university. But first, we needed to hear from our potential new members. What should the goals of our organization include? Should we affiliate with a national society? How could we build our membership? What could we do to help the scientific community at UNCW and in surrounding schools?

After searching online for guidance from like-minded organizations such as the Association for Women Geoscientists (AWG), Association for Women in Science (AWIS), and American Association of University Women (AAUW), our ideas and goals began to fall into place. Our official constitution contains a dozen purposes; our primary aspirations encompass the following:

- To promote more STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) majors at UNCW and beyond;
- To encourage young females in K-12 to engage in the sciences;

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When not sharing her love of science, Christy can often be found teaching a number of classes at the fitness center on campus such as Step Aerobics, Zumba, and Yoga.



Christy Visaggi holds a juvenile pelican during a migration banding project supported by the North Carolina chapter of the National Audubon Society. (Photo: Simon Kline)

- To provide a forum for educational and emotional support;
- To create mentoring opportunities on campus for members in science programs;
- To advocate equality in the pursuit of a profession in the sciences by women;
- To recognize historical and ongoing achievements of women in the sciences;

Although we are still laying the foundation for our organization, I'm proud to report that we have many accomplishments to boast from our inaugural year! Our members decided to select the name Women in Science and Engineering (WiSE) reflecting similar groups at other college campuses across the nation. We are not formally affiliated with a larger organization, but this name is straightforward and gives us immediate recognition online (<http://student.uncw.edu/org/WiSE/>).

One Busy Year

Every month our membership steadily, albeit slowly, increases. In less than a year, over 100 women have joined our email list. Although only subsets of our members actively participate in meet-

ings and events, our requests for volunteers are always fulfilled and are often accompanied by much enthusiasm.

So what have we done? Our outreach activities so far have included serving as science fair judges, leading events at a Science Olympiad, and establishing annual “Women in Science” awards at the Southeast Regional Science Fair. We have coordinated opportunities for engaging in field work that included pelican and sparrow banding with the local chapter of the National Audubon Society, and sampling both modern and fossil invertebrates for a UNCW NSF Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU) in Biodiversity Conservation. WiSE organized a book group on balancing motherhood and a career using the book *Motherhood, the Elephant in the Laboratory* by Emily Monosson—a book I first learned about through AWG! Our members volunteered and presented at the Sigma Xi poster symposium on campus, co-sponsored a UNCW Presents lecture by the renowned Dr. Richard Leakey, and arranged for several faculty to share their knowledge and experiences about life as women in the sciences. In addition, our faculty advisor, Dr. Laurie Patterson, gave us a glimpse of her research on computer use and gender bias.

More recently, to recognize outstanding service to WiSE, we honored several women with a celebration including our WiSE Woman of the Year Award. Our future endeavors include finalizing the development of our mentor program, working alongside the Wilmington chapter of the AAUW, offering our services to Isaac Bear Early College (a college preparatory high school), strengthening our connection to the UNCW Women's Resource Center, bringing MentorNet to UNCW, participating in panel discussions, listing scholarships and funding sources reserved for women in science, and hosting guest lecturers from academia, industry, and AWG.

It has not been easy, but such a cause is clearly worth the effort! My husband is very supportive of the enormous work I've put into developing WiSE, but he is relieved I'm no longer its President. We have an amazing new board of officers and set of departmental representatives this year; I'm confident that they will continue and expand upon the visions that Patti and I dreamed up over a year ago. Although it has been a struggle to find money in support of our activities, it hasn't dampened our spirits.

Positive Feedback

The best part about my contributions to WiSE have been the unsolicited positive feedback I hear from members such as "Thank goodness I've finally found this organization" or "I'm so glad UNCW now has its own WiSE program similar to those I've seen at other colleges" or "I can't tell you how hard it's been as a woman in engineering; hurrah for WiSE." Several of our members have jumped at this new opportunity to share their experiences. I've also found that the K-12 girls and their teachers are especially appreciative of our efforts and I'm overjoyed that I can encourage their budding love for science. Presenting the "Women in Science" awards at last year's Southeast Regional Science Fair was unbelievably inspiring, I could barely fight back the tears.

I begin my teaching philosophy statement, saying that "the thrill of scientific discovery lies inside us all." So, shouldn't we nurture that in others when we can... particularly in our fellow ladies who remain underrepresented in many scientific fields? Scientific discov-

Women in Science and Engineering at UNCW Wilmington Year I Accomplishments

January/February 2008

- WiSE promoted at the UNCW Spring Involvement Fair
- Volunteers served as science fair judges (local school, SE Regional Science Fair)
- Established three Women in Science Awards at the SE Regional Science Fair

March/April 2008

- Volunteered as event leaders in biology and geology for the Science Olympiad
- Drafted a constitution and became approved as an official UNCW organization
- Helped set-up the Sigma Xi poster symposium for the annual spring lecture

May/June 2008

- Held a spring social with guest Dr. Dennis Kubasko, Science Education, UNCW

July/August 2008

- Participated in field work for the UNCW NSF REU in biodiversity conservation
- Volunteers helped the Audubon Society with pelican and sparrow banding

September/October 2008

- Significantly increased membership at the UNCW Fall Involvement Carnival
- * Recommended a WiSE member for the IT Advisory Council for UNCW
- * Held a September potluck social at Dr. Laurie Patterson's home
- Helped co-sponsor a UNCW lecture by Dr. Richard Leakey
- Organized a brown bag lunch talk by invited speaker Dr. Antje Almeida
- Designed a WiSE website and established a logo

November/December 2008

- Learned of "Computer Use and Gender Bias" by Dr. Laurie Patterson
- Hosted a book group focusing on balancing a career and motherhood
- Developed mentor profiles and launched a WiSE mentor program
- Recognized and awarded WiSE Women of the Year
- Held elections and had a "study break" social during exams

Work in Progress

- AWG spring speaker • Blue Heron Bowl • more UNCW speakers • spring book group
- Darwin celebration • Audubon volunteering • Relay for Life team • local outreach

ery is much like happiness, in that it is most fulfilling when shared, so don't be afraid to develop your own university organization. It is a challenge, but the longer you "stay the course," the more support you'll garner along the way from friends, faculty, and beyond (such as the encouragement I have received from AWG members)!

Although I cherish my own adventures in science, I find that lighting the scientific spark in others is nothing short of euphoric. Every chance I get, I listen to the good and bad that other women have to say about the challenges they have faced being a woman, wife, mother, and a scientist. I found the speeches at the 2008 Geological Society of America's "Generation-

continued on page 13



Leah Henderson (WiSE Woman of the Year winner) and Jen Hinkley (new WiSE Treasurer) recruit new members at an involvement carnival.

WiSE Women at UNC Wilmington

continued from page 11

al Perspectives of Women Scientists” luncheon particularly captivating as are often the stories I hear at the AWG breakfast banquet which I could not attend this year. I love reading *Gaea*, especially articles on outstanding educators, as I think to myself, how I can be more like them? I’m not a professor yet, but I’d like to think that I’m already having an impact on women at different stages in the sciences, specifically through WiSE and in being a mentor for the REU that I mentioned earlier.

So despite the “leaky pipeline” and negativity we may have faced along our career paths, many of us are still here. I’ve had the common, but unfortunate, experience of being harassed, intimidated, and discouraged, but I remain optimistic and hope that my ever growing enthusiasm for “women in science causes” is contagious. Thus, I implore you to instill confidence in fellow women scientists—be it a wide-eyed child, struggling graduate student, or a professor preparing for tenure. Let them know that they can succeed, and support them in any way that you can!

I’ve had the pleasure of wonderful, supportive female advisors for each of my degrees (Dr. Connie Soja at Colgate University, Dr. Linda Ivany at Syracuse University, and Dr. Patricia Kelley at

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UNC Wilmington) and I know that their belief in my abilities has greatly influenced my career choices. The opportunity to serve as an AWG Geoscientist in the Parks during 2005 exposed me to the possibilities of employment in the National Park Service for which I am forever grateful. So take a moment to express gratitude to those that have supported you in your scientific endeavors and then find a way to pass your prosperity onto future generations...especially the ladies!

In the same spirit as yoga sessions are concluded...Namaste.



Christy Visaggi explains shell identification to REU students at a fossil locality. (Photo: Yvonne Marsan)



Dr. Patricia Kelley explains the local geology of southeastern North Carolina to REU students. (Photo: Jamie Moncrief)



Adriane Michaelis (former Vice President of WiSE) doing bird counts at Wrightsville Beach for the North Carolina chapter of the Audubon Society. (Photo: Simon Kline)

Association for Women Geoscientists

To **Encourage** the Participation of Women in the Geosciences, To **Exchange** Educational, Technical, and Professional Information, and to **Enhance** the Professional Growth and Advancement of Women in the Geosciences.

www.awg.org

Gaea (pronounced Jee-ah) is named after the Greek goddess of Earth. *Gaea* is published six times a year by the Association for Women Geoscientists.

