

HIGH EXPECTATIONS

Lunch with Dr. Victoria Holloway of L'Oreal

By Margot Stiles

In Denver this past February, I looked over the program for the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS, publishers of the journal *Science*) meeting and circled the AWIS networking luncheon. Quietly I wondered what kind of role model our keynote speaker represented.

Wasn't there a leading engineer, a distinguished professor, or an astronaut to be found? How demoralizing to think that our model of a successful woman scientist worked for a company whose image seemed so focused on traditional gender roles, so inside the box. As I took one of the few remaining seats for lunch, I tried not to wince as I moved aside the bag of free beauty products from L'Oreal.

Thankfully, my expectations were shattered from the moment Dr. Holloway took the podium. And I'm pretty sure it's happened before. While describing the twenty-page research paper she wrote in elementary school to the challenges she faced in medical school, Dr. Holloway spoke with the patient confidence of one who is used to surprising people, "Yes, they have black people at Yale...and you can tell your friends."

At Harvard, Yale, and Johns Hopkins, she gained more education than anyone in her family had ever dreamed of. Dr. Holloway painted an inspiring picture of her path as an up-and-coming researcher in dermatology. During graduate school, she certainly had no interest in "working for a make-up company." I laughed with relief and embarrassment and could tell from the audience's reaction that I wasn't the only one who walked in expecting Barbie.

However, the recruiter from Cosmair (the company later purchased by L'Oreal) made an offer that couldn't be refused by any graduate student – they took her out to lunch. By the time she polished off her meal, the determined interviewer had caught her ear. This company wanted research on the dermatology of African-American women, and they were prepared to pay for it. They hired Dr. Holloway and once again she exceeded all expectations. She was named Director of the newly established Institute for Ethnic Hair and Skin Research.

What's her secret? Dr. Holloway also spoke about identifying the forward-thinking people within any group. There are always some people who are more willing than others to try to bring their organization along. Her advice

to AWIS members in less-than-conducive work environments is to look for these people and work with them.

Perhaps even more encouraging was the emphasis she placed on women in science supporting each other. Dr. Holloway credited support from her teachers as an integral part of her success. The elementary school teacher who assigned that twenty-page paper stood her ground when Holloway's mother called to complain. When Holloway completed and turned in the paper, her teacher urged her to set higher expectations for herself.

Drawing from her experience in graduate school, Dr. Holloway is also quick to point out that successful women don't always reach out to each other – and an important opportunity is lost. She commended AWIS for its mentoring and networking efforts, and challenged us as individuals to support each other more consistently in the workplace.

For more about Dr. Holloway's research, you can look up several of her papers in the PubMed database, or check out <http://www.hair-science.com> for scanning electron microscope photos of hair and other research highlights.

Association of Women In Science Newsletter, San Diego Chapter. May/June 2003:3-4.