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Chemistry major begins Anderson's career to high-finance

Summary: Denise Anderson '83 makes her home in Zurich, Switzerland, the "financial capital of the world."

(March 2, 2007)-From time to time University of Minnesota, Morris graduate Denise Anderson '83 looks around at where she's at in life, both geographically and professionally, and is a bit surprised—pleasantly—by where she finds herself. For the past 14 years, the native of the prairie community of Maynard has made her home in Zurich, Switzerland, within minutes of the majestic Swiss Alps. Anderson arrived as a chemist. While still a scientist at heart, today Anderson is an equity research analyst and head of healthcare research for Kepler Equities in the “financial capital of the world.”

From New York to Switzerland

After receiving a doctorate in organic chemistry in 1989 from Johns Hopkins University, Anderson first worked as a senior scientist for BASF chemical company in New York City and then with Hoffmann-La Roche, a global healthcare company, in New York and New Jersey. In 1993, Anderson transferred within Roche, as it is commonly known, to Switzerland as the company internationalized its Swiss base. “At the time,” remembers Anderson, “I had not intentionally looked for a position outside the U.S., although the idea always held appeal.”

During the next five years, Anderson's responsibilities shifted from laboratory head to director. She supervised several project teams with clients in Europe, Brazil, and Singapore. Over time she noted two things: “I found that people had a hard time seeing beyond the chemist, and I was also getting a little bored.”

Exploring her options, Anderson decided to pursue a master of business administration, but leaving Switzerland or her position with Roche was not in her immediate plans. The Global Executive MBA at Duke University—the first distance learning program of its kind—allowed her to achieve her goal in 1997, and new career doors opened.

“I did not plan to make such a dramatic career change,” says Anderson, “However, once I started to look at what was possible with my additional degree, a new profession became more and more interesting.”

Science, finance, and government policy

As an analyst, Anderson evaluates pharmaceutical and biotech companies for investment opportunities. “I look at a company like Roche and recommend to institutional investors, i.e. people managing pension funds and mutual funds, whether they should buy or sell shares of stocks,” she shares. “Evaluating pharmaceutical companies requires an analyst to look at many areas: science—Will the clinical trial work or not? finance—How much money will the drug make? and government policy—Will a change in Congress bring drug price controls?”

As an expert in her field, Anderson is periodically called upon for interviews by the media, including the Wall Street Journal, Nature Biotechnology, MSNBC, and CNBC.

Except for the right to vote, Anderson is fully immersed as a member of Swiss society. “I have found Switzerland very open and welcoming to me as an American,” she states. “In addition to my work, the country has a number of advantages that keep me here. None of the cities are all that big, but they have more cultural and other opportunities than most, if not all, comparable U.S. cities. Of course, seeing all the famous sites, as Switzerland is conveniently located for even weekend trips to other countries, is also fun!”

“The hardest part,” she continues, “is the distance from family. On the plus side, I get more vacation, which contributes to a good quality of life. I actually see my family more now than when I was living in New York City.”

Improved approach to life

A longtime member of the University of Minnesota Presidents Club giving society, Anderson directs her gifts to the UMM Division of Science and Mathematics. She states: “UMM’s science and math department helped me become the person I am today. I appreciated not only the education, but also the very personal interest taken by professors. And even though my current job is considered to be finance, my science background has been most helpful.”

Anderson does have one regret about her UMM career: “One thing I can say for sure, I should have studied more German, the language spoken in this part of Switzerland!”

As does her UMM education, Anderson’s experience living abroad will impact her future wherever life takes her. “The chance to experience a different way of doing things allows you to improve your approaches to life,” reflects Anderson. “We can learn something from every culture.”

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