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Kelly Hunt Persky

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Interview with Kelly Hunt Persky
April 9, 2011
Riverwoods Conference Center, Logan, UT.

Name: Kelly Diane Hunt Persky

Date of Birth: July 6, 1961

Place of Birth: Moscow, Idaho

Question: When you were growing up was there anything that got you interested in a space career or interested in space in general?

Not really, I was somewhat interested in it, but it wasn't a passion or anything like that. In high school I just did pretty well in math and science and my parents really encouraged that. I think that they were really kind of baffled by that, they didn't really know where it came from and so they really encouraged me to keep up with the math and the science.

Question: So why did you decide to come to Utah State and when were you at Utah State?

I went to Sky View High School here in the valley because I grew up in Hyrum and I was not LDS, one of the very few, so when I was a senior I only had to go to school a half-days because I had enough credits so I went to the university in the afternoons and took some classes. That is where I ran into somebody who was part of the GAS program and that person said hey why don't you apply for this scholarship and I was like what is the space shuttle. Anyway I quickly learned and wrote up a proposal and was accepted into the program.

Question: Do you remember what your proposal was for?

I do because I changed it. So my original proposal I have to say was not my original idea, it was this person I talked to. It was a great concept to try to combine two metals that you can combine in regular gravity. It was aluminum and some other metal, unfortunately I can't remember what it was, but I eventually changed it into a biology experiment later on.

Question: Do you remember what years you were involved with the GAS program?

In 1979 right after I graduated from high school I came up to USU and part of the program and scholarship was a job, a part time job, and so I started working that summer for Jan Sojka and then I stayed, our flight went up in 1982 and I graduated in 1983.

Question: What was the experiment that was flown on the shuttle?

So what I ended up doing was sending up Duck weed which is all over the ponds in Logan. It is the world's smallest flowering plant and so it's perfect for, it's very hardy too, and so it was just a perfect little plant for this experiment. What we were doing was trying to get this Duck weed to grow for about five days in microgravity or zero G, and then it would be injected with a fixative solution that would basically kill the plant, but not harm it and kind of freeze it in time and then look at the cellular growth and changes using an electron microscope.

Question: So why were you interested in that? Why did you change your proposal?

I can't remember. I changed it because just for some personal reasons. The person that had kind of given me the original idea was, I don't think he was real happy that I was using his idea. Even though he said use this idea. So I said I don't even know how I came up with this, I wish I could remember, but I don't even remember because I wasn't even a biology person.

Question: What was your major?

Well, when I started it was physics and that was mostly because I was working for Jan (Sojka) and he said you have to be a physics person. But I didn't really like physics that much and so I change to math which I enjoyed a lot more.

Ok, that's really interesting that you had a biology project.

Question: But your project was flown and what do you, was it successful, did you learn anything from it?

Well yes, but I mean fortunately we were always taught that it's the process, not the outcome. That's not the goal, it's just the process. Mine, I don't know if you heard some of the speakers before, but there were some problems with that flight and with the electronics and mine was one of the experiments that did not get to work. It didn't get any power to it, but that was ok. I was ok. I was fine with that. It would have been nice to get to take a look at what happened, but apparently I don't really know exactly why it didn't work and I don't really know if anyone knows why it didn't work. I heard that probably the electronics weren't, there were some extreme conditions on that flight with the shuttle being pointed to the Sun for a while and to deep space for awhile, so there were some real extreme temperatures fluctuations and so that was probably, maybe, contributed to why the light didn't go on and I had a little syringe in there that was suppose to inject the fixative and that didn't happen either. But as far as what I learned the process was, I mean, just more than you could put into words. Three years of being exposed to professionals, having to get creative, being an independent worker, having problem solving skills, let alone the biology that I learned. I mean just everything was an incredible experience.

Question: Were you able to see the shuttle launched?

Yes.

Question: You went on the road trip?

Yes, I went on the road trip. Yes.

Question: Can you talk a little more about that?

I don't remember a lot of, I know Dave Yoel saying there was some contention, but you know it was just great fun. I just loved the social aspect of it. It was just incredible. We just drove and drove this big white van and slept places that, I have no idea whose houses that we were at. But it didn't matter, you know we were in college and you were just easy going so it was great and we drove day and night. I remember, probably at the launch, we stayed at the Florida Institute of Technology dorms. They had the biggest cockroaches in those dorms. I didn't want to turn the light off because I was afraid one would land on my face and suffocate me. So those are the kinds of things that stick out besides the fact that we were closer than the press. First hand seeing the shuttle launch was just incredible. Just the whole thing was a whirlwind of going here, going there and getting interviewed and you know I'm just a young person from Hyrum and I was just in awe of all of it. It was just a wonderful fantastic experience

and then we pile back in the car and drive to California to watch it land and again it was just full of wonderful things. Oh and then we stopped at the World's Fair on the way too. It was in Tennessee and it was just, I can't believe that opportunity existed for us. It was really a lot of fun.

Question: Can you remember some of the names of people who were on the trips and worked with you in the labs?

Yes. Well there was David Yoel and Jim Elwell and Terry Thomas, who is here, and Rus Laher and Chris Alfred, Amber Dailey. I saw the picture, who else was in there. I have it written down, Steve Walker, Karl Sackett. I think that is about it.

Question: I was wondering if you were the only women on the team, but you mentioned Amber.
Yes.

Question: Did you guys have any different experiences being the only women, being the two women on the team?

I'm sure we did. I think we were a novelty especially in those days, it was unique. Probably got us a little bit more attention being the two women, but I don't really think it was maybe that much different. I don't feel like I was really like a science crazy geek kind of person. Definitely a nerdy person, but I really wasn't into for the science as much as I was for the whole experience. I think I got a lot more out of it.

Question: Do you feel there are any experiences you had with other team members that were especially positive or maybe really humorous or even not the best experiences that you would like to share?

Well, let me think. I feel like you know really looking back it was more of an individual experience for me because we all had our own experiments. So I was really working on my own, making my own container. Then I had a biology advisor and then working with Jim Elwell, because his part was the controller. So I don't really, no I wouldn't say there were any highlights or low lights working with the other members. I mean we were all kind of doing our own thing, working together, but doing our own thing.

Question: Do you feel like you gained some skills from the GAS program that helped you later in your life?

Absolutely. Yeah definitely. You become an incredible problem solver and your ability to just stick with things. Again I was working trying to make my container smaller and smaller and smaller because we just had to fit in this limited space and working until two in the morning, three in the morning, four in the morning by myself in the lab that was just something that you just kind of push yourself a little bit more and you say ok I lived. So when I did get into the work force I know it had a huge impact on my ability to work through problems, to be creative, to know that there's a way to get things done, and not take no for an answer.

Question: What is it you do now or right after college?

Well let see right after college. Evidentially I went and got my master's in math at the University of Washington and then moved to San Diego. I started applying at some defense contracting companies and also applied for a job as a programmer for a publishing company.

They offered me the job and I thought I'll just stay here for a year until I get a real job and I ended up there for twelve years. Just absolutely loved it and it was a great fit for me. I ended up being a project manager and system analyst and eventually managing a department of business analysts and project managers. I know having this experience was the reason why I was so successful in that job. Then I had a second child and decided to quit my job so I've been a mom for the last twelve years.

Question: Is there anything else that you would like to add about your experience with the GAS team or any members or mentors?

Well, Jan for sure. Jan Sojka has had a huge impact on my life. I can never thank him enough for his patience and how much he taught me with humor and patience mostly. Just some of the great friends I've had. Jim Elwell, we've been friends since the beginning of time, since we first met because of this program. He's just been a great friend and it's weird to look back and think gosh it's been 28 years or more since we did this. It's been good.