

Legends and Legacies Book Chapters

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**Special Advisor to the Provost
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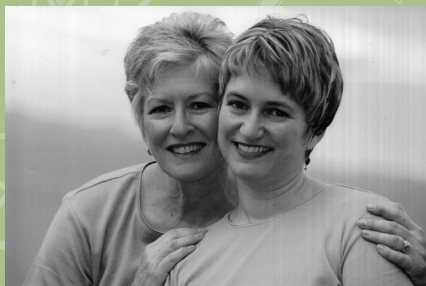


Margaret and husband Isaiah (Josh) Fidler, D.V.M., Ph.D., are the only married couple to have served as presidents of the American Association for Cancer Research since the organization was founded in 1907.



In 2002, Margaret and horse Charleston competed in a three-day Texas cross country course.

(Photo by Jim Stoner Photography)



Daughter Katherine Krijke helped Margaret celebrate her 60th birthday at Lake Tahoe in 2003.



Favorite photo subjects for Margaret and Josh are their grandchildren, from left, Evan, 7, Eden, 3, and Jake, 9.



It seems to me that I have always loved natural science, particularly biology. I have no doubt that this proclivity came, in large measure, from my father, who was an amateur naturalist and a great gardener. Although my parents were products of the Great Depression and had little formal education, they were interested in learning and made the effort to take an occasional night class at a junior college in a nearby town. Dinner conversations often centered around Dad's classes in anthropology and archeology. I knew about Darwin's theory of natural selection and survival of the fittest before I went to high school, and I had heard about Margaret Mead's and Ruth Benedict's studies of other cultures long before I took anthropology in college. Because there were no boys in the family, I became the surrogate son and gardened and fished with my father, while my older sister took up more traditional female activities. I suppose this formed the basis for my assumption that girls need not be limited to traditional roles and for my expectation that I could do whatever I wanted professionally.

From kindergarten to college, I lived in a small town in an agricultural region of northern California. I was always a good student; I read lots of books, took all the elective courses my school had to offer, played classical piano, and was strongly encouraged by my parents to do more. In retrospect, it is clear that they were trying to keep me out of trouble by keeping me as busy as possible! Since this was the immediate post-Sputnik era, science was pushed strongly in schools. In my junior year of high school, I was selected to attend a summer program for potential scientists at Santa Clara University, sponsored by the National Science Foundation. Predictably, I gravitated toward the biology projects and loved every minute of the experience. As a senior in high school, I was a cheerleader and a valedictorian and thought about writing a book titled "I was a teenage spinster," owing to the fact that several of my friends were married in or shortly after high school. I knew, however, that this was not my goal in life; I was college-bound and determined to see more of the world than my immediate environs. Finances and a scholarship conspired to keep me close to home, however. In 1961, I headed off to the University of California at Berkeley to study zoology, becoming the first member of my family to attend a major university.

My thoughts of a career in those days didn't extend beyond a vague hope that I might someday go to medical school. However, the transition from being first in my small class to being one among thousands of bright kids in classes larger than my entire high school took its toll on my grades. I did well in biological sciences and fine arts but poorly in social and physical sciences. It took me the first two years just to figure out how to study. Meanwhile, there were distractions — beer, bridge and boys (of course) — and there were also political issues — the Free Speech Movement, Civil Rights and

later, the Vietnam War, the sexual revolution and gay rights. I did my share of marching and sitting in, but in the end, my heart still belonged to biology. Although it wasn't apparent to me at the time, I learned some things about leadership during those years. My role models were the leader of the Free Speech Movement, a Berkeley student named Mario Savio, the Reverend Martin Luther King and President John F. Kennedy. (And yes, I remember exactly where I was when the president was assassinated.) Charisma, passion and an inspiring message seemed to be the common characteristics of these successful leaders.

Toward the end of my undergraduate years, it was clear I wasn't going to medical school. In those days, only the select few at the top of their class could get in, and for women, this was doubly true. Unlike today, when women make up around 50 percent of medical school classes, in the mid-1960s women were still an anomaly in this setting and not particularly welcome additions. Besides, there was the cost issue. After my parents had sacrificed to send me to college, I wouldn't think of asking them to continue to support me beyond graduation. So while I was agonizing over what on earth I was going to do with a degree in zoology, a miracle happened. The summer before my senior year, I received an invitation from my professors in bacteriology to come and talk to them about my career plans, since I had done well in their course. This occurred because there was concern at Berkeley that undergraduate students were not receiving enough attention from the faculty. In addition, generous funding was available for student stipends in all areas of science, again because of the post-Sputnik push to upgrade science in America. These fortuitous circumstances were responsible for my scientific career. I was quickly rechanneled into an undergraduate major in bacteriology and immunology and was admitted to graduate school (with a stipend), in spite of my less than stellar academic record.

In graduate school, I quickly found my niche in the research lab. My parents diplomatically suppressed their concerns that I was graduating from college without either a husband or a job and that I was going to remain a student for another few years. They remained supportive, however, and helped out with expenses when needed. As a second-year graduate student, I married an assistant professor of mathematics and, in doing so, improved my lifestyle and my bridge game as well as my understanding of statistics. Shortly thereafter, my thesis advisor (one of the bacteriology professors who had rescued me), emigrated to Israel to become chair of the Department of Immunology at the Hebrew University-Hadassah Medical School in Jerusalem. This afforded me the opportunity to explore one of my life's goals, which was to see more of the world. I convinced my husband to take a sabbatical and finish a book he was writing, and, after a crash course in Hebrew, we went off to Israel.

This was a phenomenal learning experience for me, little of which had to do with science. I learned as much about my own country as I did about my host country. Living in a Jewish state taught me a lot about the significance of separation of church and state. Living in a country with socialized medicine illustrated both the advantages and limitations of our own medical system. Similarly, observing a political system that involved a coalition government improved my understanding of the pros and cons of our two-party system. Most of all, it made me appreciate how many things we take for granted in the United States that simply are not available in other parts of the world. I concluded that every American teenager should spend a year living in another country in order to develop an appreciation of the privileges they enjoy simply by being born in the United States.

Somehow in the two years we were in Jerusalem, I managed to complete my thesis research and become pregnant. My daughter Katharine was born in Hadassah Hospital two months before we were to return to the United States. By then, I had finished my lab work (the six-day work week helped a lot) and was finishing writing my thesis. It seemed like a convenient time to have a baby since there would be a gap between completing my thesis and starting postdoctoral work. So I returned from Israel with a Ph.D. and a new baby.

Since it had been my choice to go to Israel, it was my husband's choice where we went next. While in Israel, he had decided to leave mathematics and become a neurophysiologist, so he began seeking training opportunities in that field. For three months after we returned to the States, we drove cross country, visiting the two sets of grandparents, first in New York and then in California. Along the way, we visited some potential labs for my husband and eventually ended up at Ohio State University in Columbus, where he began to work and apply for fellowships to support his retraining. Needless, to say, I needed a job quickly and was fortunate to find a postdoctoral position with a professor of microbiology and immunology who had recently joined the faculty.

During that period, I suffered my first professional disappointment and my first encounter with gender discrimination. My thesis research, which I, of course, thought was brilliant, was rejected for publication by the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*. I was devastated and ready to give up my research career, believing I had failed as a scientist. Once again, I was rescued by my thesis advisor, who patiently explained that this was not the end of my career and that I needed to address the criticisms of the reviewers and resubmit the paper to another journal whose editor was more sympathetic to the issue of immune surveillance. He was right, of course. The paper was accepted without revision and published in the *International Journal of Cancer*. The discrimination issue, however, did not have as satisfying an outcome. During

my job search, I was asked to interview with a professor in the medical school. After talking with me for a while, he apologized that he didn't really have a position open at the moment, remarking that it was a shame that his two postdocs (both male) had just hired a technician (female), since otherwise, I would have been perfect for that job. While I was digesting this comment, he asked me if I had any possibilities for a job elsewhere, and I replied truthfully that I did although the position didn't pay very well, so I had not accepted it yet. At that point, he proceeded to assure me that there should be no problem since I was married and my husband could support me. Rather than try to explain that my husband was jobless at the moment and I had an extra mouth to feed as well as child care expenses to pay, I thanked him for his time and left. I could have explained or complained then or later, but I felt it was futile since there seemed to be no common ground between our points of view. Today, I would probably behave differently, but at the time, it was probably a wise choice to walk away, avoid burning bridges and concentrate on other, more immediate battles, like getting a job.

My postdoctoral period was again a great learning experience. This time I learned more science and broadened my perspective considerably. I also learned something about what it was like to be a Black professional in America, since my professor was African-American. Against that backdrop, gender discrimination seemed somehow less important. Because I had been a Civil Rights sympathizer, if not an activist, in my Berkeley days, we had much to talk about. Toward the end of my second year, I received an unsolicited invitation to interview for a position in the Department of Pathology at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. The job was a non-tenure-track research faculty position that involved running a large National Cancer Institute (NCI) research contract dealing with immune suppression and skin cancer. When I read the job description, I knew it was the perfect project for me. Immune surveillance and cancer was the subject of my thesis research, and I felt that I knew as much about the subject as anyone else in the country. Even though my postdoctoral mentor had recently become a department chair and had offered me a tenure-track faculty position in his department, I responded immediately to the invitation from the University of Utah and arranged for both my husband and me to go for interviews.

It was indeed the perfect project for me, and a wonderful environment. The only negatives were that the position was non-tenure track and that there was no faculty position available for my husband. I somehow had the foresight to ask about the possibility of my receiving a tenure-track position. In response, I was asked why I felt I needed one. My answer was that I had been offered one elsewhere and that it would look much better on my resume if I went elsewhere in the future. The department chair went back to the dean with my request, and it was granted, partly because I was a perfect fit

for the job and they needed me to run the project but mostly because there were so few women on the medical school faculty that it was advantageous for the school. This time, and in all my subsequent appointments, the gender issue actually worked in my favor. As predicted, my work went exceptionally well, and I made discoveries that formed the basis of my lifelong scientific career.

I very quickly began to develop national recognition. I can identify three factors that helped me in this regard. The first was my discovery of the unusual immunologic properties of ultraviolet light-induced skin cancers, which was published in the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*. I actually received a personal letter from the editor thanking me for submitting my work there; this was especially heartwarming in light of my rejection of a few years earlier. Second, I had wonderful mentors. The chair of my department taught me a great deal about science, administration and focus; another pathology colleague and director of the research contract taught me organizational skills and transplantation immunology; and a professor of biology and a consultant on the contract taught me photobiology and introduced me to the American Society for Photobiology. Years later, I served as president of this society and received both its Research and Lifetime Achievement awards. All of these colleagues served as critics, mentors and advocates for my work and career. Third, I developed a productive working relationship with the sponsors of our research contract at the NCI, which gained me additional external recognition and another source of career support and advocacy within the granting agency.

Meanwhile, my husband had managed to carve a niche for himself by using his talents as a teacher and supporting part of his salary from a research grant. Although we both loved our work and were happy in Salt Lake City, our marriage did not survive. Having grown up with a serious case of the “Cinderella Complex,” I was uncomfortable in the role of primary family professional. My expectation that my successful assistant professor of mathematics would simply take care of me the way Prince Charming took care of Cinderella had not materialized, and I was resentful. I can only surmise that the fact that I was sought after and successful academically caused similar resentments on his side. In spite of my determination to make things work, fate intervened. I was invited to speak at a Science Writers’ meeting in Florida, sponsored by the American Cancer Society, where I was dazzled by another participant, a flamboyant scientist named Josh Fidler. I came home from the meeting with the sad realization that my marriage was not going to work and that I needed to get on with my life and career. My husband and I parted ways with much pain and regret, particularly for Katharine, who was then just 4, and I became a single, working mother.

Apparently the dazzling was mutual, because Josh made a trip to Salt

Lake City to see me shortly thereafter. We decided to explore places to go to be together. We were extremely fortunate during the next year to be invited, independent of each other, to look at laboratory director positions at the newly created NCI-Frederick Cancer Research Center in Maryland. Although Josh was offered a position in Salt Lake City, it was too far from his children, who were then 6 and 8 and living in Philadelphia. The positions in Frederick seemed like a reasonable option, even though Josh gave up a tenured faculty position at the University of Pennsylvania to go there and even though there was a high level of uncertainty that the center would succeed. In 1975, we went to Frederick and began the first of our 32 years of marriage.

The Frederick years were both difficult and wonderful. Work was terrifically successful for both of us. We lived in a small town where Katharine could walk to school and I could run home at a moment's notice. After a few years, my mother joined us in Frederick, which enabled me to be more active in attending scientific meetings, and my career thrived. The director of the research program taught me a great deal and was a great advocate for my career. He gave me opportunities for leadership that were invaluable. Since I was new at the leadership game, I made many mistakes and suffered the consequences. This was a critical, though painful, period of growth in my career as a leader. I had to learn how to deal with difficult people, how to fire underperformers, how to listen, how to give honest feedback and how to accept disappointments. I also learned that being authentic is essential for successful leadership. As with all good things, this era also came to an end. There were leadership changes at the NCI that suggested our idyllic existence was likely to change. Also, we were facing the prospect of three children going to college and needed a more secure working environment than the center could offer.

Once again, we were phenomenally lucky in our professional lives. Josh and I previously had both turned down opportunities to look at other positions because we were so comfortable personally and professionally in Frederick. However, when things began to change, I insisted that we needed to look elsewhere. Since Josh had been approached about positions at M. D. Anderson Cancer Center several times in recent years, he took the initiative to inquire whether there were appropriate openings for us there. Over the next six months, department chair positions and start-up packages materialized for both of us, and the opportunities and the institution were so attractive to us that we never looked anywhere else. Again, I believe the gender issue played in my favor. I was the first female chair of an academic department at M. D. Anderson, and again, life was both satisfying and challenging professionally. During the ensuing years, I garnered support and recognition for my research, trained students and fellows, and built a fledgling

Department of Immunology from scratch. Also in that time, Josh and I became the first and, to date, only couple to have both been elected president of the American Association for Cancer Research.

I was given many opportunities for leadership and participation at the institutional level, which helped me succeed in a highly male-dominated environment. In recounting my mentors, all of whom have been male, I cannot fail to acknowledge my husband, who has been my strongest supporter, fiercest protector and most astute political advisor. He has also allowed me to develop as a leader, even though sometimes it has created hardships for him professionally and socially.

After 15 years as a department chair, I began to feel that I and the department needed a change. I was not learning anything new administratively, my science and students were suffering from lack of attention, and my department needed greater strength in basic and translational immunology than I could provide. I therefore informed my supervisor that I would be stepping down within the next two years, either to return to my laboratory or to pursue other administrative opportunities.

To help clarify my next course of action, I applied for an executive leadership development course designed specifically for women in academic medicine (The Executive Leadership in Academic Medicine Program). During that year-long curriculum, I again learned a great deal about leadership, my personal style, and my strengths and weaknesses as a leader. In the end, it was clear that I was ready to give up my successful research career, although reluctantly, to take on new leadership challenges at a higher level. Fortunately, timing was on my side because a new president had just been appointed. The institutional restructuring that took place shortly thereafter provided the chance for me to advance to a new leadership role. I am most grateful for the opportunities to grow and learn that resulted from my successive roles as Vice President, Senior Vice President, and eventually, Executive Vice President for Academic Programs. I am also appreciative to those who helped facilitate my appointment by President Bush as a member of the President's Cancer Panel, which reports to the White House on issues of concern in our nation's cancer program.

It is not possible for me to recount all the lessons I learned in these roles or to thank all those who helped me. My goals in assuming this leadership role were to bring a new level of transparency and clear criteria for success in our academic enterprise, to help create a more supportive environment for women, to develop a culture of leadership and accountability, and to help improve the quality of research and education in the institution. I will leave it to others to judge the outcomes. However, participating in our faculty leadership development course over the past few years motivates me to end by articulating my own leadership principles.

First, always tell the truth. Consistency is necessary for gaining trust, and besides, it's easier to remember what you said. Second, always be accountable for your actions and take responsibility for your decisions. Third, give people as much information as they need, or at least as much as you can. If you don't, they will make up stories about what is going on. Fourth, strive for excellence, and make decisions based on this guiding principle. Fifth, reward the behavior that you want. Never punish success and never reward bad behavior. There are two other principles that I have used throughout my personal and professional life. One came from my mother, who told me never to put anything in writing that I wouldn't want to see on the front page of the newspaper. This is still good advice, particularly in these days of instant electronic communication. The second principle came from a high school teacher, who said her mother told her to always leave the party while you're still having a good time. I have tried to follow this advice when changing career directions, and it is the main reason that I have recently stepped down from my position as Executive Vice President and am continuing to work only part time. I am looking forward to a more relaxed existence than I have had for the past nine years — one that includes more time to ride my horse, garden, cook, travel and play with the grandchildren. So far, I am not lacking for things to do!

