Building the Next Generation of Leaders

"Worry less about the job market, the job plan, and focus on doing good science."

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"The delicate balance of mentoring someone is not creating them in your own image, but giving them the opportunity to create themselves." — Steven Spielberg

Damon Runyon is committed to ensuring that early career scientists are paired with exceptional mentors so they are empowered to reach their highest potential. In fact, this positive experience has motivated many of our past award recipients to mentor new generations of scientists. We talked with two former Fellows about this important facet of life as a successful scientist: **Abby Dernburg, PhD**, Howard Hughes Medical Institute investigator and professor of molecular and cell biology at UC Berkeley, and **Daniel Jarosz, PhD**, assistant professor of chemical and systems biology and of developmental biology at Stanford University.

What role did mentors play in your early career?

DJ: A key role for a mentor is to help you select the best project to work on. I'd been interested in biology since I was a kid, but my undergraduate mentor Rachel Klevit helped me channel that curiosity and focus it in an area where I could make progress. Later mentors (Graham Walker and the late Susan Lindquist) also pushed me to think about how to make my work important to as many people as possible. Finally, science is not the easiest career—you often move around the world, sometimes far from family. There's this myth that to be a good scientist you must be a "science monk." I was very lucky to have mentors who proved that wrong by integrating the many demands in their lives: work, family, and enjoying life.

AD: During my undergraduate years, I had a great Teaching Assistant for organic chemistry at UC Berkeley and worked in a couple of labs, including Dan Koshland's when he was the editor of Science magazine. Dan took me under his wing, edited my senior thesis and taught me how to present my work in a written format. His mentorship helped me develop the confidence to start graduate school.

My PhD mentor was very hands-off and that worked for me. In selecting my postdoctoral mentor, I chose someone who would be more hands-on — Ann Villeneuve, who encouraged me to focus on C. elegans and meiosis. No one else was studying it at the time, so it was exciting because everything was new.

Why do you have DR fellows in your lab?

DJ: I think they're the best. There's significant added value from receiving a Damon Runyon award because of the broad community of first-rate fellow scientists, which is especially important at the post-doctoral level.

It's incredibly rewarding to see what people come up with when Damon Runyon gives them the opportunity to "blue sky" a cancer research problem. And since the Damon Runyon Fellowship offers 4 years of support, Fellows have the freedom to pursue a project that's riskier but where the impact could be much greater.

AD: I encourage my people to apply for the Damon Runyon Fellowship because it remains one of the top fellowships available. Damon Runyon is a benevolent group of people looking to fund the best science. I've had the opportunity to support Fellows in their career development through participating in the Fellows Retreat and helping them on their job search. It's a nice opportunity to see the best and brightest junior scientists. They have such great potential and it's fun to see them blossom in their careers.

Are there added benefits of early career mentoring for cancer researchers?

AD: Everybody needs positive mentoring experiences. One of the great things about science is it's a blend of creativity and intellectual prowess. You need to figure out your strengths and play to them. A good mentor will help you recognize those strengths.

Initially, cell biology seemed unstructured and too-open ended for me but then I realized that's what I do well—observing things and figuring out how things change. Experimental biology is also interesting to me—figuring out new techniques and applying them to an interesting problem.

DJ: My postdoc mentor Susan Lindquist always said, "Take care of the science and the science will take care of you." She wanted us to worry less about the job market, the job plan, and focus on doing good science. Damon Runyon support gives that flexibility to the most talented folks out there.

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