

## THE NAMS MENTORSHIP PROGRAM

### A fitness trainer becomes a professor: the Henderson-Elavsky mentor-mentee pair in The North American Menopause Society Mentorship Program

The inaugural class in The North American Menopause Society (NAMS) Mentorship Program consisted of six mentor-mentee pairs. My interviews with each of the six mentors and six mentees have been the feature of six consecutive editorials, the purpose of which has been to acquaint you with the individuals but, more importantly, to document the accomplishments at a personal level of this very successful program and to encourage others to participate.



Steriani Elavsky is a native of the Czech Republic, majoring as an undergraduate in Czech language and literature at the University of Ostrava, in a city an hour away from her hometown of Krnov and about a 4-hour drive east from Prague. During her education, she worked at a fitness center as a trainer. "I was always interested in physical activity and especially the psychology of physical activity."

There were no programs in the Czech Republic focusing on the psychology of physical activity behavior. Furthermore, it is not easy to change the trajectory of your education in the Czech Republic, so Steri turned to America to pursue her interest.

Steri applied to several American Universities with programs in kinesiology. Accepted by all, she chose, in August 2000, the Department of Kinesiology and Community Health at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, which had an emphasis in exercise psychology and aging. She was excited to find a graduate program studying the social psychology of physical activity and how physiological factors can impact psychological variables. Steri earned a Master of Science degree and in 2006, a Doctor of Philosophy degree.

Working under the guidance of Edward McAuley, Professor of Applied Health Sciences, Steri focused on physical activity motivation in middle-aged adults, especially women, an interest that originated with her female clients during her years as a fitness trainer. In 2006, Steri moved to Pennsylvania State University, where she is an Assistant Professor of Kinesiology. About 40% of her time is devoted to teaching subjects such as the psychosocial dimensions of physical activity and aging, the psychology of movement behavior, and physical activity interventions.

Steri is active in the world of kinesiology. Her major interest is not only how physical activity affects well-being but also in "how to get people to do it." Her experience with midlife woman led her to explore the literature dealing with midlife physical activity, and she was surprised (perhaps pleased) to find little "out there." Starting with her master's thesis, she concentrated on the relationship between physical activity, menopausal symptoms, and quality of life. Steri's doctoral thesis was a randomized, controlled trial that demonstrated a positive effect of walking and yoga on quality of life in midlife women. Those that experienced a reduction in vasomotor symptoms had a greater improvement in quality of life.

Steri's NAMS mentorship project used the objective measures of both symptoms and activity, culminating in a poster presented at the 2010 NAMS Annual Meeting, entitled: "Examining the Effects of Physical Activity on Vasomotor Symptoms Using Objective and Subjective Measures." The study demonstrated that, contrary to some earlier reports, a bout of moderate-intensity exercise does not increase but actually decreases objectively assessed vasomotor symptoms. At an individual level, however, increasing the duration of moderate-intensity physical activity is associated with more hot flush symptoms. Steri believes that this is an interesting and potentially very important dissociation. She intends to continue along this pathway, studying the effect of various activities and examining the roles that fitness, fatness, and hormonal status play in the relationship between physical activity and quality of life.

Steri joined NAMS to expand her interest and knowledge in the health of older women. She has been well funded and was already well published before she participated in the NAMS Mentorship Program. Unlike some of the other mentor-mentee pairs, "getting started" was not the objective or motivation for Steri. Steri wanted guidance and direction in the clinical aspects of her work. Clinical expertise was something that was hard to find in the environment of kinesiology. "I would like my work to be meaningful not only in the physical activity field but also in the overall field of menopause. I was looking for a mentorship to make my work more relevant in the clinical domain."

Steri's mentor is Victor W. Henderson, currently Professor of Health Research and Policy, Chief of the Division of Epidemiology, and Professor of Neurology and Neurological Sciences at Stanford University. He is a graduate of the Johns



Hopkins University School of Medicine, and he completed residency training in neurology at Washington University (Barnes Hospital) in St. Louis, followed by a fellowship in behavioral neurology at Boston University. He also studied epidemiology at the University of Washington. From 1981 to 2001, Victor rose through the academic ranks at the University of Southern California,

becoming Professor of Neurology, Chief of the Division of Cognitive Neuroscience and Neurogerontology, Chair of the Department of Neurology at the Los Angeles County-USC Medical Center, and the director of the Alzheimer's Disease Research Center Clinical Core. In 2001, Victor moved to the University of Arkansas, and in 2004, he moved to Stanford. Victor served as President of NAMS in 2007 to 2008.

Victor believes that the NAMS Mentorship Program was "a brilliant idea. It benefits NAMS and it benefits the individuals participating in the program." He agrees with Steri that his "role is easier and different than it would have been with someone with less research experience and with less knowledge of the field. I primarily provide feedback and shaping, a role that would not work with someone who was less accomplished. I don't need to find projects for Steri; she has her own. I usually wait for her to call or email."

Steri does communicate when she has a need. "It is so helpful to have someone I can email or call at any time with questions regarding menopause research. Victor is wonderful. He gives me respect by being a good listener; he lets me educate him about my area, something that was relatively new in my experience." Here is a lesson to be learned for future mentors: good advice first requires good listening. "Victor listens and then provides his input. He lets me tell my side of the story, but then presents how things might be perceived by clinicians. From this perspective, the Mentorship Program has been invaluable. I especially appreciate the ability to apply the mentoring at my own pace, to seek advice when I need it. Victor is always quick to respond, and he is very effective in providing his guidance. The frequency of the mentoring is not as high as it is within a department, but I am actually getting more out of it."

Victor is very pleased with the NAMS Mentorship Program, pointing out that there are bright young people interested in menopause and that this program is an excellent

method to find those people and foster their involvement with NAMS. Victor and Steri join the other mentor-mentee pairs in the inaugural class of this NAMS program in an impressive collective record of success.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

It seems appropriate to me to conclude the last of these editorials by highlighting what I learned from my series of six mentor-mentee interviews. The accumulative involvement of the six pairs in the NAMS Mentorship Program featured the following experiences:

- Opening doors and creating new relationships with key people; assistance in planning new projects and writing new grants
- Gratification from helping younger people to create new collaborations, expanding a network of contacts
- Raising the next generation of investigators, including the successful establishment of research in a community hospital, and support for an individual already relatively far along in a career
- Assistance in helping individuals overburdened with clinical obligations; creating a connection with an individual in a foreign county
- The encouragement of a private practitioner to pursue an interest or to answer a puzzling question
- Connecting a basic scientist with a clinician-scientist, making science relevant to health problems and health care
- Great distances between mentors and mentees proved to be easily overcome with modern electronic communication

It became apparent that there is something different to be learned from each mentor-mentee pair in the inaugural class of the NAMS Mentorship Program. Although each mentor-mentee relationship is unique, molded by the unique circumstances and environments of the individuals, each pairing culminated in satisfaction for both mentor and mentee derived from a job well done. The list of positive accomplishments and experiences constitutes impressive testimony for the success of this program and a convincing argument to sustain this pioneering effort by NAMS. Details of the program are available at <http://www.menopause.org/mentorship.aspx>.

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