

The Significance of the Porter Development Fellowship for my Career

Nathaniel G. Pitts

When I was an undergraduate at Whittier College (1965-69), I worked about 24 hours a week every year that I was in school. While I was a solid and committed science student, I did not have the chance to focus or concentrate on my studies. As I was finishing my PhD, the Porter Fellowship allowed me to focus on my science and to become more familiar and comfortable with the career in science I had chosen.

As an undergraduate majoring in Biology/Chemistry and minoring in Psychology, I worked in the campus dining hall as a busboy, a drink-boy, and later a dining room supervisor during weekdays (\$1.10-\$1.35/hour). As an upper-classman I worked for a chemical company as an intern. During summers, I would take classes and work on the college grounds crew and teach tennis, a skill I had learned in high school growing up in southern California. During my undergraduate years my energy was always split between my science studies and jobs "to make ends meet."

When I became a graduate student in the Department of Animal Physiology at the Univ. of California at Davis (1969) I did "work-study" during my first year and then was a teaching assistant for the next two years (pay about \$2,000/year). I remember trying to get financial aid my first year, and a financial aid advisor telling me I did not qualify. However, he could (and did) give me a meal ticket for the entire year which allowed me to eat in any dorm cafeteria at anytime. That was unbelievable to me! He did not seem to understand just how much aid that was to me. I also continued to teach tennis during the summers to supplement my income. During these years, I was studying my science but was unable to focus on my career.

After I passed my qualifying exams for the PhD, my major Professor (Dr. Irving Wagman) informed me that he had located a fellowship for me through the American Physiological Society, the Porter Development Fellowship, which supported minority graduate students in physiology. I had no knowledge of this award, after all, I was just a graduate student, but I was pleased for any support I could receive. By now I was married, my wife was an elementary school teacher, and this fellowship gave me almost as much money as my wife made teaching in the city schools.

I was a California resident attending the Univ. of California and so my graduate school expenses were limited (about \$70-90 a quarter for tuition). The award from the Porter Development Foundation (the name at the time) was for (I think) \$4,000 (tax free!), and that was a great deal of money in those days, especially for someone who had been working all his academic life doing other, non-science related things for financial support. That fellowship changed my life.

I remember writing a thank you letter to Dr. Clifford Barger (the overseer of the Porter Development Foundation) and informing him of the significance of this award to me. This award allowed me to stop teaching tennis during the summers and work on my research project, pain mechanisms in the spinal cord. This award allowed me to stop doing all of the non-academic related things and to focus on my chosen field of study, neurophysiology. This was the first time in my academic career that I

had been able cut away all the non-academic issues I had been forced to pursue for financial support in order to stay in school, and just do science.

I could now make solid progress with my research project without having to leave it for long (or short) periods of time. I was finally able to concentrate on my career, go to scientific meetings, read the literature leisurely, and to meet and talk to people in my field. This was a new way of life for me and the Porter Development Fellowship allowed me to get this feeling, this feeling of what it is truly like to be an academic and to be totally immersed in a specific field of study. This was something I had never experienced and it was truly enjoyable. I finished my PhD work with a positive feeling about my future.

Money would be an issue once again, when I accepted a postdoctoral fellowship at the Rockefeller Univ., working with Victor Wilson and Barry Peterson (in the original Lloyd Lab). The postdoc was on an existing grant, and was

Pitts Makes Donation to Porter Physiology Development Committee

Nathaniel G. Pitts, Porter Fellow from 1972-1974, has provided the Society and the Porter Physiology Development Program with a generous contribution through The Pitts Family Foundation. The Foundation was established by his father, Dr. Raymond J. Pitts, Sr. "for the purpose of supporting creativity in the arts, humanities, and sciences as they relate to cultural diversity in its broadest sense."

The \$50,000 contribution was pre-

sented to Dexter Lee, Chair, Porter Physiology Development Committee and Martin Frank, APS Executive Director, by Nathaniel Pitts and his sister, Fran Pitts Smith. The donation was made to support "the fellowship and career development activities of the Porter Physiology Development Committee" in recognition of "how effective the Committee has been in promoting diversity in the physiological sciences." ❖



Nathaniel G. Pitts, Dexter L. Lee, Fran Pitts Smith, Martin Frank.

for \$6,500 for the year. And I do not care what year it was, \$6,500 does not go far in New York City. To be specific, after the \$450/month rent, I remember having about \$50/month left over from that postdoc check. Fortunately, my wife got a job within the first two months. And, I taught tennis on the Rockefeller Tennis court in exchange for certain goods and services.

Prior to going to the Rockefeller, I had written to the Porter Development Foundation to see if they would consider

supporting me during any part of my postdoc period. They declined the request for postdoc support BUT were willing to provide me with \$1,100 for travel cost to move from California to Manhattan. Once again, this was monumental for me! For a long time I had learned how to piece together support in order to continue my scientific pursuit. This Porter award got me from the west coast to the east coast, from an outstanding institution to a world-renown, biomedical institution where I was considered junior fac-

ulty, and into a world class lab.

When I finally got to the National Science Foundation as an Assistant Program Director (July 1977), a bouquet of flowers came to me from Cliff Barger congratulating me on my new appointment. We remained in contact until he passed away. I made my career in science administration and had an extremely successful career at the NSF until my retirement in 2008. ❖

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