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With no regrets

H Ila *nee* Bhatnagar

I was born in a middle-class educated Kayastha family from Mathura, U. P. In our family, girls were supposed to be highly educated, as well as to develop household skills. My father, the late Ramesh Chandra Bhatnagar (M.Sc., Physics, 1936, Allahabad) was the first inspiration in my life who sowed the seeds of perseverance and perfectionism in me.

I was the third sister in a family of five daughters and two sons and my father's aim was to educate his daughters just like his sons. At a time when there were not many career choices for women, I was encouraged to become a medical doctor.

After I passed high school in 1958 (from the Methodist Girls' High School, Moradabad, with distinctions) my father was transferred to Gorakhpur where I finished the intermediate in 1960 (from A. D. College), and the B.Sc. in 1962, from Gorakhpur University. Simple living and high thinking was our motto at home. My father expected us to top the class in every test and examination. Although, we did not need to work very hard (most of the other girls were studying to get a degree just as an ornament!), my father's expectations created an indirect pressure: I felt as if the world would collapse if I stood second in the class!

In 1961 I appeared for the pre-medical test for U.P. state and I topped the examination The first time a woman candidate had ever done so! However I was not destined to become a medical doctor – I joined King George Medical College, Lucknow, but returned home after a week to continue my B.Sc. at Gorakhpur University. When I look back, I am still not clear why I left medical college (surely it was not ragging!). May be I was afraid that I would have to study for several years: M.S. or M.D. after the five years of M.B.B.S. However, what an irony, as I am now in a profession studying whole life as a researcher and teacher (which I enjoy most). Anyhow, even today when I am at the end of my career, I do not regret this decision.

In 1962, my father was transferred to Kanpur. I finished my M.Sc. in Chemistry in 1964 from D.A.V. College, Kanpur. The best thing which occurred in my life was admission into the Ph.D. programme in chemistry at I.I.T. Kanpur. I was just being packed off to Allahabad University, my father's dream university, to pursue a Ph.D. programme with a C.S.I.R. fellowship. However, a sudden interview call from I.I.T. Kanpur changed everything. Facing stalwarts like Profs. C. N. R. Rao, P.T. Narasimhan, M. V. George and M. S. Muthana, I was really nervous, and at first, they were not willing to admit me since I had not studied mathematics at the bachelor's level. I was admitted on Prof. Rao's suggestion that I be allowed to take an extra 'Mathematics for Chemists' course.

After that, there was no going back. Most of the young faculty at I.I.T., including Profs. Rao, Narasimhan, George, Ranganathan and Chakravorty, were highly enthusiastic about building not only our career, but theirs as well, and it is these teachers who created in me a genuine interest and love for chemistry. Those were the happiest days of my life filled with challenges and dreams of becoming another 'Madame Curie'!

I was the first woman to get a Ph.D. from I.I.T. Kanpur graduating in 1968 and a short post-doctoral assignment at Purdue University, I joined the Central Drug Research Institute, Lucknow as Research Scientist in 1970.

I married Junjappa in 1971, another turning point in my

life. Such south-north marriages were not common at that time; it was a conscious decision on my part as a marriage of two professionals. Organic chemistry has remained the biggest binding force between us throughout our lives! We started our careers as a husband-wife team. Ila- Junjappa is better known in chemistry circles than Ila or Junjappa!

Time passed very fast and we never realized it, since we were deeply engrossed in research and publishing papers. Year 1976–77 brought another turning point in our life when due to professional reasons, both of us decided to join North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, a decision which we never regretted. My husband first went to Shillong as founder Head of Department. It was then a bare forest with no research or science culture. However this did not diminish our spirit and after three to four years of hard work, we built one of the best chemistry departments of the country with a state of the art laboratory and library and instrumentation facilities. Those were the most productive and challenging research years (1980–1990) with publication of several breakthrough papers in heterocyclic chemistry. Despite several geographical disadvantages of Shillong, its scenic beauty and people enriched our lives.

After spending more than 18 years in Shillong (1977–1995), I returned to I.I.T. Kanpur, my alma mater, as professor, spending my last eleven wonderful professional years there. A few awards and recognition came to me, though late in life and after many disappointments. However, at the end of the day, what matters most is whether we enjoyed our journey or not and my answer is yes. I enjoyed every bit of my life, my passion for research and teaching organic chemistry, ‘our husband-wife research team’ our daughter, our friends, my travels abroad and above all, hundreds of our students, who enriched our life.

I should especially thank our sixty Ph.D. students who have made us sustain research and are doing extremely well in their professional lives both in India and abroad. It is like having sixty children spread out all over the world, since we always had a familial relationship with our Ph.D. students.

What helped me to sustain my career was first of all my

passion for organic chemistry, then hard work, perseverance, and aiming for excellence, perfection and creativity in every aspect of my life, the lessons taught by my father. My husband was highly cooperative in grooming me as an independent and professional woman.

Would I do anything differently if I had to do again? My answer is no, since I believe in Dalai Lama's teaching that 'under any circumstances, try to do your best, so that when you look back, you do not have any regrets'.

And I do not have any regrets in my life.