

Connections: STEM for all and a passion for pitching

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One of the earliest memories of Brittany Parker Kerrigan, Ph.D., is plucking bugs from her family's pool and trying to bring them back to life.



"I knew from a young age that I wanted to help living things," says Parker Kerrigan, associate director of research planning and development in Neurosurgery.

Her parents encouraged her childhood interests and, by junior high, Parker Kerrigan was daydreaming about becoming a doctor. What she knew for sure was that she wanted a career in science.

"Biology was one of my favorite subjects," Parker Kerrigan says. "But then in eighth grade, my science teacher, a woman I looked up to, told me I sounded stupid when I spoke, which made me question whether I could ever succeed in a scientific career. I never forgot how that made me feel."

'Are you lost?'

Instead of deterring her from pursuing her dreams, that teacher's comment planted a small seed that has grown into a full-fledged mission for Parker Kerrigan: The acquisition and retention of underrepresented populations in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). Today, she runs STEM workshops and presentations at local elementary and middle schools. She's also a regular speaker and panelist at MD Anderson and other hospitals in the Texas Medical Center.

When addressing a young audience, Parker Kerrigan likes to tell a story from her undergraduate days at the University of California Irvine, where she earned a bachelor's degree in Biology.

"My first day in my first neuroscience class, I walked right up to the front row of desks," she recalls. "I was so excited. There were very few women in the class, much less 6-foot-tall blondes like me, who modeled in high school to earn money for college. When I sat down, the guy sitting next to me turned and said: 'Are you lost?' It felt like eighth grade all over again. So now, when I speak with young girls or underrepresented minorities about careers in STEM, I tell them that just because you look a certain way, or just because you have a certain background, doesn't mean you can't pursue any career you want."

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Right and left hands

Parker Kerrigan earned her Ph.D. in neuroscience from the MD Anderson UTHealth Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences in 2014, graduating with a 4.0.

When asked to describe her current role at MD Anderson, she says: “I’m the right and left hands of Frederick Lang, M.D., and Vinay Puduvalli, M.D. I’m like a chief of staff who helps oversee brain tumor research.”

As a scientific administrator, Parker Kerrigan does high-level research planning, strategy and development. Her current focus is cancer neuroscience research, which encompasses brain tumor research, neuroscience and neuro-mental health, and the toxic effects of cancer treatment. She is also co-creator and overseer of CATALYST (CNS Tumor AnaLYsis STream), an effort to profile patients’ central nervous system (CNS) biospecimens in a streamlined, comprehensive, multi-platform way.

In 2020, she was named The University of Texas MD Anderson Department of Neurosurgery Employee of the Year.

Elevator pitch

Parker Kerrigan’s academic background allows her to review her department’s scientific work with a learned, critical eye. She enjoys writing grants and helping her colleagues with their speeches, and she also knows how to read a room.

“My parents were very invested in my career and wanted to know what I was working on, so I practiced giving my presentations to them,” she explains. “I learned how important it was to translate science to non-scientists, how powerful analogy and metaphors can be. I speak with a lot of donors and philanthropists, and I pull out the significance of science in ways that audience can understand.”

She teaches those same skills to faculty and even visiting high school students.

“I teach elevator pitch workshops,” Parker Kerrigan says. “A lot of it has to do with how to convey your brand and show the significance of what you’re doing. It’s like a ‘Shark Tank’ pitch. Scientific communication is a skill every scientist should have. We’re getting tax dollars for research, so the public should be able to understand what our research means.”

Evolving goals

Ever busy, Parker Kerrigan teaches neuroscience courses virtually at Rush University in Chicago. And for the past decade, she has devoted herself to the Association for Women in Science (AWIS), becoming president of the Houston chapter in 2014 and rising through the ranks to join the AWIS National Governing Board in 2021.

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“Getting the leadership role in AWIS has been tremendous for me,” she says. “I’m in meetings with women who run companies, and I am following in the footsteps of one of my mentors, Elizabeth Travis, Ph.D., our associate vice president for Women and Minority Faculty Inclusion.”

As Parker Kerrigan’s career has evolved, so have her goals.

“As a child, I used to want to be Bill Nye the Science Guy,” she says. “But now I am married and a mom to three sons. When I go to sleep each night, I feel proud and fulfilled about my career and my family. So long as I’m making a difference, I know I’m in the right place.”