

## Meet the Laboratorian(s) - Don Giger and Anita Young

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This issue of the NPHL Newsletter will feature two laboratorians that have 60 years of combined laboratory experience. Dr. Don Giger and Anita Young (see Page 5) have had long careers in Laboratory Medicine at the Omaha Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Center and The Nebraska Medical Center, respectively. Both have recently retired, although each continues to work in the laboratory on a part time basis.

### Don Giger, Ph.D.

#### What are you doing now?

I have retired from VA employment, (as the Microbiology Supervisor at the Omaha VA Medical Center) but am still a part-time employee of Creighton Medical Laboratories (Pathology Department). I have begun my 26<sup>th</sup> year as a “contributed services” member of the Creighton University Faculty in the Department of Medical Microbiology/Immunology. My present responsibilities include teaching in the Creighton Medical and Dental schools and participating in the Pathology Resident training program.

#### What got you interested in pursuing a career in science?

While enrolled in the Biological Science Department at Cal-State University, Long Beach, a friend got me a part-time job washing glassware in the laboratory of a community hospital. After getting a B.Sc. degree, I entered the two year Medical Technology Training Program and on completion passed my California State licensure and ASCP Registry exams. I was eligible for the military draft and, on the advice of one of our pathologists, applied for a direct commission as a Laboratory Officer in the Army.



In the fall of 1963 I was assigned to a “Station Hospital” (200-300 beds) in Nürnberg, Germany. During my Army tour of duty I became interested in microbiology (and got to know one of the civilian nurses at the Hospital). Louise and I got married and returned to California in 1966 - about a year later I again became a student, this time in a Master’s program in Microbiology. I worked part time as a Medical Technologist while taking classes – my major Professor was Frank Swatek, one of the “old-time” medical mycologists whose research interests were on the ecology of *Coccidioides immitis*. (Dr. Swatek’s mentors had included mycologists CE Smith and J Walter Wilson.) Soil collecting trips to prehistoric American Indian villages, and working in mycology labs as a Teaching Assistant got me hooked on the science of mycology – and seeing the clinical side while working in a hospital lab made it all the more meaningful. I decided to continue my research interests by applying to a recognized Medical Mycology training program at Tulane University. This was the beginning of a four-year stay in New Orleans – a fascinating, historically rich city – and study at Tulane Medical School, an academic medical center with a long tradition of excellence in tropical medicine, parasitology and medical mycology. For a family with small children it combined the usual stresses of low income ‘student life’ with visits to the lake front, swamp tours, Mardi Gras parades during the weeks before Lent – not to mention some of the most interesting food we have yet to find. For a graduate student, life in this strong microbiology/immunology department having several faculty members with long-standing ties to the medical mycology “community” was a challenge. There were three Ph.D. students there at the time and we learned about pathogenic fungi from the lab perspective, the patient’s view (working in the Dermatology clinic at Charity Hospital) and were taught the exacting science of mentors who thrived on detailed study of molds and yeasts.

#### What do you enjoy most about working in a clinical laboratory?

A feeling that what laboratorians are doing has a positive impact on patient welfare, and that many times this significant information can *only* be determined by testing in the laboratory. In microbiology, many results still come from visual impressions – triggered by years of a Technologist’s experience.

I enjoyed (and still am enthusiastic about) the problem-solving aspects of laboratory medicine. In the days when we used the Spectronic 20, the Klett colorimeter, an SMA 12 and ... before the days of CLIA or NCCLS or Coulters, there were always challenges in providing correct results. But the biggest changes have taken place in (1) the increase in regulatory oversight of laboratory science, (2) the introduction of instrumentation in microbiology, (3) management of information with computers and (4)

molecular/genetic testing in infectious disease diagnosis. (It's hard to believe that "networking" in the VA Medical Center meant driving with exam questions or memos to the Creighton Department of Microbiology/ Immunology. Or that the VA rejected several requests to purchase laboratory instrumentation because "they contained 'a computing device'" – this is the same VA system that now relies on a state of the art electronic record in patient care!)

**What advice would you pass on to someone entering the Medical Technology profession?**

Keep in mind the science in "Laboratory science" – disciplines in the Laboratory, be it Chemistry, Immuno-Hematology or Microbiology, have a long history of pioneers who were inquisitive about why things work. It is not enough to spend the day generating "results", no matter how accurate. Concentrate on mechanisms, or organisms, or pathways – why a result occurs.

Don't fear being "a specialist" – even though you gain a lot of satisfaction from being a 'jack-of-all-(lab)-trades' you can contribute even more by seeking out a niche where your co-workers will consult with you. And if you enjoy teaching, share that expertise readily.

Keep your idealism and your professionalism active – patients benefit from honesty and integrity and we need to keep their welfare uppermost in our daily activities.

**Anita Young**

**What are you doing now?**

I retired from full-time work as a Virologist at The Nebraska Medical Center microbiology laboratory on January 21, 2005. Although I am not working full-time, I have stayed on with the laboratory as "casual labor". I have also started to work at the Nebraska Public Health Laboratory (NPHL) as a surge capacity employee during the West Nile Virus season. At NPHL I prepare mosquitoes for polymerase chain reaction testing as part of the Mosquito Surveillance Program at the Nebraska Health and Human Services System.

When I am not at work I concentrate on catching up on family, house repairs, and traveling that I have been putting off due to working full time.

**What got you interested in pursuing a career in science?**

Although I loved English in school, I have always considered myself to be a science nerd despite considering a career in English. As a child I remember going to science fiction movies which always seemed to perk my interest in the sciences. Ultimately I ended up studying science and biology in school and deciding on a career in science.

**Where did you attend school?**

Although technically I am not a medical technologist; I graduated with a degree in Biology from Saint Joseph's College in West Hartford, Connecticut in 1964. My first job at the virus laboratory at the Connecticut State Health Laboratory in Hartford, Connecticut lasted until 1968.

The desire to "expand my horizons" brought me to Nebraska later that year after a friend told me about job opportunities at the state's two medical schools; Creighton University Medical School (CUMC) and the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC). My first job in Nebraska was at CUMC in the biochemistry department working for Dr. Edward Carusi. Dr. Carusi was a researcher who focused on Oncogenic (tumor forming) viruses. My job was to propagate Adenoviruses and extract the DNA for the research. This, of course was before PCR-which made the work very challenging.

I was forced to find a new job after Dr. Carusi's grant ended in 1970. Thankfully, I was offered a job at UNMC by Dr. Roberta White in the Medical Microbiology Virology Laboratory. I worked for Dr. White until 1985 when departmental shifting at UNMC placed the virology laboratory into the Pathology Department at which time virology became part of the clinical laboratory. I continued to work for UNMC in the clinical laboratory until 1997 when UNMC merged with Clarkson Hospital and became The Nebraska Medical Center.

**What did you enjoy most about working in a clinical laboratory?**

Like many who work in clinical laboratories, I love the investigational aspect of the work. I especially enjoy it when a physician appreciates my effort when I contact them with a significant result. When this happens it makes the whole day more enjoyable because I have directly affected patient care.

**What advice would I pass on to someone entering the Medical Technology profession?**



Take advantage of every educational opportunity and learn all you can. Don't look at the job as if you are just putting in hours to earn a check. Always remember that what you do and the quality of your work can be very significant in a patient's care and recovery.