



Dr. George Negrete - Chemist

1



If someone told me as a kid that I would grow up to become a professor of chemistry at the University of Texas at San Antonio, I would have thought that they were nuts. In fact, a junior high school teacher advised me, like he did the other Mexican American students, that I should not be taking algebra. Fortunately, I had supportive parents, and found some teachers in high school who explained to me that college was an option after all.

I was not one of those who sailed through college smoothly. I abandoned the idea of a chemistry major after one year of studies and was pursuing an anthropology degree instead. After attending Stanford University for two years I dropped out. What started off as an expectation to only leave college for a year, quickly became six. A lot happened during this period: I married

Josie, worked everyday at a bottling plant, and was active in social justice issues like immigration and educational opportunity. I do not feel that my time away from school was wasted. These experiences are part of who I am. And besides, I believe that had I finished Stanford in a regular fashion, I would never have returned to complete a degree in chemistry. I don't think it's likely that I'd be as happy at some other career as I am as a chemistry professor.

The second time around, college felt like a choice and not an obligation. With my return to school at San Jose State, it was apparent that while I had a new sense of maturity and that my love of chemistry had never left. Initially I was just concerned with earning a bachelor's degree to increase my career opportunities, but after assisting an inspiring professor with research in the university laboratory, I couldn't envision myself doing anything else. I wanted to become a professor and he assured me that if research was truly my passion, then nothing could prevent me from making that goal a reality. Besides being a father and a husband, research and teaching has become my purpose in life.

Being a professor is a long jump away from being an auto mechanic, and I would have never gotten to where I was if I wasn't so interested in chemistry. Science always fascinated me—especially learning about molecules and atoms—but it wasn't until I engaged in research at the graduate level that I obtained the fire to go above and beyond. It has led me to a very privileged place in society, a place where I'm able to do what I really love to do and get paid for it. As a professor, I encourage my students to pursue anything they are passionate about. This is a message underrepresented minorities students tend to not receive as often as they should and one that I hope to communicate through my work as Associate Dean for Diversity Initiatives at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA). In my students, I see the possibility of changing the world and increasing the diversity among faculty, specifically in field of chemistry.

We are a long way from diversity at the faculty level. To get there, we are going to have to train large numbers of students in science, starting at an early age. More students need encouragement pursuing science and math, and those who are proficient need to be sought out. With enough people trained in these areas, the few that are really passionate can go onto become members of the college faculty and research scientists. In the grand scheme of things, our individual contributions get magnified with the next generation. I've passed on the teachings of my professors to my young students, who will hopefully go off and continue the message.

It is important for everybody to discover an area they are willing to commit all of their efforts to, because passion is what gets us to do the heavy lifting in our lives, making dreams obtainable no matter how large. It is also essential for students to go through life at their own pace—not the pace dictated by teachers and guidance counselors—because time can reveal our true passions. By exposing ourselves to a bit of every subject, we discover what truly inspires us. It takes a lot of work to be great at something. After returning to go back to college, my agenda was to go as far as I could. I told myself that if I didn't make it as far as I would have liked, I didn't want to feel that I could have performed better. That experience taught me to just keep moving forward, to progress. Progress is what I expect in my research and in my life. Of course everyone should learn from their experiences, but the past should never extinguish our dreams. If everyone makes it their mission to be more experienced in the attempt to discover what truly drives us, what makes us passionate—then the only place to go is forward.