

Bob Langer: inspiration for job seekers

As a graduating PhD, [Robert Langer](#), now Institute Professor at MIT, was having trouble finding work.

As he told the Health Innovators Group of Combined Jewish Philanthropies on Friday, most of his classmates took jobs with oil companies but he knew that wasn't for him. Having helped found an alternative high school in Cambridge, he applied for 50 or 60 jobs in curriculum development, but no one wrote him back. Then he tried medical schools and hospitals, but "they didn't write back, either." Finally, someone in his lab told him that someone at Children's Hospital sometimes hired "unusual people."

That "someone" was Judah Folkman, who, in 1974, was beginning to work on angiogenesis, which involved the idea that cutting the blood flow to tumors could halt their growth. The possibility intrigued Langer, who was hired—but made a rather inauspicious start.

As a post doc, he spent half of his time scraping meat off of cow bones delivered from a South Boston slaughterhouse. He discovered 200 methods that didn't work;. He faced hostile scientists who told him they didn't believe anything he said, and, as time went on, was denied many patents by officers who were were unwilling to accept his proof.

It took until 2002 for the first angiogenesis drug to gain FDA approved. By then, Bob, who wouldn't take "no" for an answer, was MIT's most prolific inventor and a University Professor who had helped found many companies and inspired countless students—who now run departments, labs, and companies of their own.

I've known Bob since the 7th grade...and was in the 8th-grade

English class in which, he tells people, he was so shy that he froze during a public speaking exercise, and got an F. We both went to Cornell, where, he's told me, he found that he learned more studying on his own (and playing bridge) than going to class. And I remember sitting in a pizza parlor with him in 1982, watching as he diagrammed his ideas on a mechanism for "slow release" for pharmaceuticals—on a napkin.

Despite his success, a recent writeup in Nature, and much excitement about possible "pharmacies on a chip," a stem cell device to help individuals with spinal cord injuries, and an adhesive for heart surgery based on the sticky-stuff that allows gekkos to climb up walls, Bob remains the same old Bob, who sometimes gets ideas for new devices, materials and methods from television and magazine magazines. He's still down-to-earth, supportive, and even funny. (Did you know that the most surgical devices are invented by doctors who use household materials to fit their operating needs...which is why the "stretchiness" material used in artificial heart is the same stuff used in ladies' girdles?)

So- for job hunters out there the message is simple but profound. Believe in yourself and your ideas, treat people kindly, and keep on going.

Great talk, Bob. Once again, bravo.

AMH

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