

An Excerpt From an Interview With CYNTHIA BURROWS on 3/23/21

LH (Lydia Hall): Fantastic. So, kind of backtracking a little bit in terms of, y'know, impact and in terms of, you know, your own career and from your own personal perspective, have you ever had any experiences with imposter syndrome and as a teacher and mentor yourself, if you had a student experience this, was there any way you were able to help them combat that?

CB (Cynthia Burrows): Yeah, I mean, I feel like, um... Now, I know what imposter syndrome is. I feel like, um, A certain amount of that is a very healthy thing... right? Because you should always be questioning, "Do I know what I'm doing? Do I, you know, have I prepared well enough for this lecture, for this, um, proposal, paper, whatever, you know, have I read the background material? Am I qualified to do this?" I mean, if you were out there saying, "I'm the smartest person in the world and I can do anything."

[laughs] Oh my gosh, there's something wrong. On the other end of the scale, if you're saying "I can't do anything, I'm hopeless." Well, that's not very productive either, is it? So somewhere in the middle is a good place to be. You should always be questioning your ability, your knowledge, your, eh, your approach to problem solving, because that makes you better, right? If it's—it's when it becomes pathological and that it's not productive. Yeah.

I mean, I did have a student at Stony Brook who was, she was so funny. I mean, she grew up in Long Island. She had never been off of Long Island in her life. And, uh, and then I had, um, a collaborator, in France, who was helping us with this project. A woman in France that I knew from my postdoc days.

And so I said, "Kathy, you know, you could apply for this fellowship and go to Strasbourg for six months, and work with our collaborator. I think that'd be a good experience." And she looked at me like, [shocked expression, laughs] "What are you talking about? I've never been more than 20 miles from home in my entire life." You know? Nice.

Well, still, might be a good experience. So, she applied for the fellowship. She got it. She said, "Oh my gosh, do I have to go? Do I have to go?" [laughs] So, she gets on the plane. Okay.

Again, this is maybe... email was not common in ...1990 or whatever it was. So she gets on the plane. She goes first to, uh, some workshop to learn, in the middle of France, somewhere to learn French.

Then she goes, uh, for one month, stay there. And then she goes to Strasbourg where, you know, my collaborator is completely fluent in English. There's not a problem. Um, I finally, finally, finally, get a postcard from her after about six weeks. And with some trepidation, I turn it over. I read the postcard that basically says, *I love it. I'm not coming back.* [laughs]

So, you know, so anyway then, um, she finished her PhD. She got a job at, um, SUNY Maritime. It's a campus where, uh, basically a Naval Academy for state university of New York. And, uh, within, she got tenure within a few years and immediately became head of the science department. [laughs] Here's a woman who was afraid to go 20 miles from home and, uh, yeah, complete turnaround. [laughs] Just—that was great.