

Rutgers University Commencement 2008

By Student Speaker Melanie Spero

When I made the choice to come to Rutgers, I was a high school senior graduating from the smallest public school system in Connecticut. I was certainly the only one to choose Rutgers from my graduating class of 53 students, and possibly the first ever from my town. Of course, leaving my tiny hometown for such a large school took me entirely out of my comfort zone. But looking back, I now realize that choosing Rutgers was one of the best decisions of my life. I quickly discovered that the breadth of Rutgers is its greatest asset. Each of us here today is a representative part of this large community, coming from various departments, programs, and schools. The division of our university into smaller schools and campuses establishes intimate settings, where deans and professors are well known and well liked by the student body. Yet taken as a whole, Rutgers has the remarkable ability to excel in a range of areas, providing students and faculty with an abundance of opportunity.

My earliest opportunity at Rutgers presented itself as I scanned my first copy of the Daily Targum. I happened across an ad for Rutgers women's rowing, seeking girls who were at least 5' 8", with no need for rowing experience. I couldn't believe it. According to those criteria, I was completely qualified! Well, so were the other 56 girls who went out for the team. But after a full year of practicing and perfecting the same rowing motion everyday, only twelve strong rowers remained --- eight of whom would earn gold medals at the Big East Championships. Together we endured four years of 6 AM wake-up calls, blistered

hands, aching backs, sub-freezing weather, millions of meters of rowing, and whatever hazardous pollutants the Raritan River could provide us. Though there were many times we wondered why we persevered, there was something compelling about working to develop our strength and endurance every day. Gradually, we found a place that was ours at Rutgers. And while my teammates and I found our place on the Banks of the Old Raritan, there are certainly many other places to find yourself.

My sophomore year I decided to take advantage of the many research opportunities at Rutgers, and I joined Dr. Eric Lam's lab in the Plant Biology and Pathology department. I couldn't wait to learn about research labs: to see how people developed brilliant new ideas, and to learn how scientific progress was made. I recently re-read the original e-mail I sent to Dr. Lam. I really wanted him to take me into his lab, but again, I had absolutely no experience. In the e-mail, I described myself as "a hard-working rookie," and hoped that might be enough. For the second time, someone at Rutgers was willing to give me the chance to excel, despite my lack of qualifications. When I first walked into the lab, I didn't know what to expect. My best guess was that I would start from the bottom: washing test tubes, properly disposing of biological hazardous waste, or perhaps feeding the pet fish. In short, I thought I would learn over the shoulders of far more experienced scientists. And while this turned out to be partly true, I was surprised and excited to learn that I would be given my own project, something that no one in the lab had worked on before. The goal of my project was "to develop a novel system for studying the redox state of the nucleus in the model plant *Arabidopsis thaliana*." I soon discovered that this translated into a method for gathering information about a cell's nucleus, by creating transgenic plants that produced a protein, originally from a jellyfish,

which made the plants glow bright green. I was quite taken with my fluorescent green plants; they made me feel a bit like a mad scientist. And yet this was serious research.

But aside from the science, being in a lab also gave me a glimpse into my future. I started as the only undergrad in my lab, surrounded by post-docs and grad students who were light-years ahead of me. Without question, these grad students and post-docs were more valuable to me than any book I read in college. Not only did they maintain their own research projects, they worked with students as teaching assistants and spent hours of their time mentoring students like me. Somehow they found the time and patience to answer my non-stop questions, or to walk me step-by-step through a 10 hour-long protocol. I will always be grateful to them.

And so I started the Fall Semester of my senior year, busy with my fourth year of rowing, my second year of research, my usual load of class work. I had absolutely no time for anything else. Or so I thought. Life after Rutgers was approaching frighteningly fast, as were the deadlines for applying to graduate schools. Fortunately, my advisors and professors proved to be invaluable in the application process, helping me to make major decisions amid GREs, essays, application forms, and letters of recommendation. Now when it came to graduate school, I figured I actually had to be qualified; this time they weren't looking for tall people, or hard-working rookies. And I was soon to learn that my Rutgers experience had made me a strong candidate for the Ph. D. programs to which I was applying, both through my classes and through my interaction with the knowledgeable people in my lab. My first invitation for an interview came by way of a

phone call from the University of Wisconsin, and soon I had interview invitations from a half-dozen excellent research institutions. I went to all six interviews --- each lasting from Thursday through Sunday --- and I thoroughly enjoyed learning about the different research projects, talking with outstanding professors, and eating all of the delicious, free food that they gave me. In the end, I chose to study Microbiology at the University of Wisconsin, not just for the cheese, but in large part for its striking resemblance to Rutgers. I have confidence in the ability of large communities to provide an enriching academic environment, and believe strongly in the importance of the collaboration that occurs in large research institution settings. And I have no doubt that Rutgers will continue to provide an excellent education for its students, and that this education will provide us with opportunities throughout our lives.

Thank you and good luck!