

# Career in focus

## Non-Profit Organizations

In this issue, the Career Network SPYglass presents answers to frequently asked questions about careers in Non-Profit work. We also interviewed Dr. Samantha J. Hutten (pictured), a Ph.D. graduate from the Albert Einstein College of Medicine who has successfully transitioned into a career in which she is applying her expertise in Neuroscience as she works to evaluate and manage grant applications as the Associate Director for Research Programs at the Michael J. Fox Foundation in New York City.



### FAQs

#### **What is a Non-Profit Organization?**

Nonprofits are not-for-profit organizations that seek to fulfill a mission rather than generate revenue. Nonprofits come in all sizes and are usually overseen by a Board of Directors, consisting of a President or CEO, a few branch or division leaders, and major donors. Nonprofits are typically funded by a combination of donations and fundraising efforts.

#### **Why switch?**

For those who are passionate about a particular cause, switching to nonprofit work is a direct way to make a difference in the world, advocate for a charity of personal importance, and use their expertise to give back to the community. Unlike academia where the goal is to publish high-profile papers to earn academic respect and prestige, nonprofits celebrate the accomplishments of a team rather than an individual because advancing a cause is more important than personal accolades. If these values resonate with you, then nonprofit work may be a good job fit for you!

#### **What positions are available in Non-Profit Organizations?**

Nonprofits offer a wide range of job opportunities, including traditional benchwork, pharmaceutical drug discovery, biotechnology development, outreach program development, grant review, editing/publishing, and public speaking. The nonprofit sector provides the same jobs that other professions offer but with the added benefit of working towards a cause.

#### **Where will you work?**

Here are some examples of the diverse array of jobs offered from a variety of nonprofits with different goals:

[Society for Science and the Public](#) - serve as a Science Education Outreach Coordinator, which can help shape the next generation of Science Policy

[American Association for the Advancement of Science \(AAAS\)](#) - work as an editor and/or publisher for *Science* and the widely popular *Science Careers* publications and interactive career services platform

[SRI International](#) - perform consulting-style research focused on designing innovative technologies and applying those findings to unconventional applications

[Institute for OneWorld Health](#) - work on bench-style research to develop novel affordable pharmaceuticals to fight deadly diseases plaguing citizens in developing third world countries

[Multiple Sclerosis Society](#), [Michael J. Fox Foundation](#), [Autism Speaks](#), [Muscular Dystrophy Association](#), and others - serve as the Science and Research Initiatives Spokesperson for the society or work on the Grants Management Team to review, award/decline, and manage academic research grants and grant awardees/PIs.

#### **How to make the transition?**

Identify the type of job that interests you and work to hone the skills you would need for that role. Second, identify a cause that you are passionate about and demonstrate that passion - volunteer at a fundraiser, attend conferences in that specialty, assist local charity efforts that closely align with the goals of your target organization and/or cause.

#### **While you are at Yale**

As nonprofit work comes in many forms, take advantage of the vast array of opportunities at Yale to develop skills necessary for a position that interests you. For those interested in the position held by our featured scientist for this issue's Career in Focus, participate in the editing and reviewing process for the [Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine](#).

## **Interview with Dr. Samantha J. Hutten, Ph.D.** **Associate Director, Research Programs, Michael J. Fox Foundation in New York, NY**

### ***How did you get interested in Non-Profit work?***

I didn't specifically set out looking to work in non-profits. In fact, I didn't even know it was a career option for a PhD until I went to my first "What Can you Be With a PhD" seminar (hosted by NYU every other year). I never really saw myself staying at the bench, and I knew I wanted to be doing something that I felt had a direct human impact. Working for a non-profit organization seemed appealing in that it gave me that patient connection and a broad perspective on what really impacts them. One thing about working in academia that is a pro and a con is the fact that we are all so specialized. We become experts in the science that falls within our niche, but sometimes the bigger picture gets lost amidst the details. Working at the Michael J. Fox Foundation (MJFF) has exposed me to such a broad variety of Parkinson's disease research, and being able to draw connections between these very different areas of science is what makes it so engaging.

### ***What is the structure of the MJFF organization?***

Compared to other non-profits, MJFF is large, about 100 employees, but there are only 12 scientists. The structure of the organization is somewhat flat in the sense that, of the 12 scientists, many of us are Associate Directors or Directors, and then we are all overseen by two vice presidents of Research Programs (who have both been with the foundation for a long time). The vice presidents then report to the CEO, who actually started out in my position in the early 2000's and is now the CEO, which is so inspiring!! Amongst the scientists, we each have Priority Research areas that are headed by a senior PhD. I specifically work on our Biomarkers Team, but I also work closely with the Alpha-Synuclein Team.

### ***Can you share your career path with us?***

I got my B.A. in Neuroscience and Behavior from Vassar College in 2005, after which I worked at a small biotech company specializing in behavioral testing of mouse models of Huntington's disease. It was during that time that I realized that in order to get ahead in that field (which is what I thought I wanted to do back then), I had to go back to school. I spent 5.5 years getting my PhD in Biomedical Sciences at Albert Einstein College of Medicine, where I worked in the laboratory of Dr. Ana Maria Cuervo. Ana's lab specializes in autophagy (protein degradation in lysosomes), and my work was on autophagy deregulation in neurodegenerative diseases (particularly Parkinson's). I defended in March of 2013 and stayed on until December as a post-doc in my lab. I applied for some biotech/pharma positions, but without doing a formal multi-year post-doc, I couldn't find anything in those areas. I took a job as a Science Writer at the Healthcare Consultancy Group, where I worked on scientific content for drug

companies and medical devices. I had applied for the Research Programs job at the Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's research before I took that job, so when they called me back, interviewed me, and offered me the job 5 months later, I was really excited to accept.

### ***What does a typical day look like for you?***

One of the best things about my job is that no two days are the same. There are a lot of meetings throughout the day, but these range from teleconferences with one of our grant awardees about the progress on his/her grant, a brainstorming session about the best new avenues for research on LRRK2 (an enzyme encoded by the *PARK8* gene, which, when mutated, is associated with increased risk of developing Parkinson's disease), an in-office meeting with representatives from the FDA, or a grant review of the rolling application proposals we received that week. We also have a lot of scientific support from our external advisors who are generally clinicians and researchers that can help us understand the patient perspective and the challenges faced by doctors treating patients. They come in for meetings several times throughout the year during which we determine our upcoming strategies and priority focus areas. We also solicit buy-in from our Patient Council, so those meetings are always really helpful to understand the patient perspective as well. Sometimes we even conference with researchers at other non-profit organizations like the Cure Huntington's Disease Initiative (CHDI) or the Alzheimer's Association. So, no two days are the same and all of them are extremely interesting and provide great opportunities to learn.

### ***What type of background work - reading, conferences, etc - is necessary for your job?***

We all have a portfolio of grants that we manage, so when I first started, I did a lot of reading on Pubmed about Parkinson's Disease (PD) biomarkers, since that was going to be my area of focus. I always worked heavily on assay development, so I did a lot of research on ELISAs and different ways to measure alpha-synuclein in blood, cerebrospinal fluid, etc., since this wasn't something I had worked on in the past. Before I took over the ongoing grants in my portfolio, I would research each of those individual project proposals and read the papers that that lab had previously published. I do the same thing whenever I start managing a new awardee. Likewise, I have my Pubmed alerts set up to capture what's going on in the PD field, and even the Alzheimer's field since they are ahead of us in a lot of ways in terms of biomarker development, clinical trial recruitment, etc. We also always send some scientists to the big PD conferences, and even to general biomarker conferences. Additionally, we sometimes do lab visits as well if we're in the area for an event.

**What are the pros and cons of working with grant awardees?**

It keeps you on your toes scientifically! Even though I'm not doing lab work, I need to know what's going on in the world of PD research, whether that's basic biology, mouse model work, or clinical trials. Also, the calls to a first-time awardee telling them that they're going to receive funding are the best because they're usually younger and incredibly excited/grateful. Those calls make my day!

On the other hand, it's hard to have those difficult calls with a researcher who hasn't met their milestones. All of our awards are milestone-driven, so we set goals for our awardees that are attached to a portion of their monetary award. If they don't meet their milestones (set up over the months of their award), we don't release the next payment until they do. We understand that science doesn't always work out the way we expect in our desired timeframes, but at the same time, we want to be mindful of how we spend our money, and we're accountable to our donors, so we want to make sure we're spending the money in the best and most efficient way possible.

**Is there an opportunity for career growth at MJFF?**

I definitely think there is, judging by the fact that the CEO started in my position and worked his way up! The Foundation is extremely organized, and there are a lot of opportunities to go to "Brown Bag" (bring your own lunch) seminars to learn about other aspects of the foundation (development, fundraising, etc). Based on these learning opportunities, it seems as though they are very interested in developing talent within the organization itself, and they certainly encourage me to go to any meeting or seminar that interests me even if I'm not directly involved in that area of research. It's a very stark contrast to other types of jobs where you have to bill your hours, for example, and every hour you're not billing is time you're not being 'profitable' to your company. At MJFF, they want me to put in the time early on to learn about the organization and grow within it, which makes me feel like they really value me and want me to stick around (which is awesome!).

**Can you describe the application/interview process?**

I had been watching for a position at MJFF on LinkedIn, and I even contacted the two Vice Presidents of Research through that mechanism to inquire about jobs, but at that point they weren't looking for a new scientist. Then, when I saw something posted on LinkedIn for this job opening, I filled out the online application right away. I didn't hear from them for a long time, but then they called

me to set up a phone interview. After another month or so, they brought me in for an in-person interview. I had previously interviewed at CHDI (the Huntington's non-profit), and that interview was really intense because I gave my thesis talk and then met one-on-one with people for a whole day (9-5). In contrast, MJFF was really laid back. They asked me the usual types of interview questions about my thesis work and why I wanted to work with them, but it didn't feel so much like they were grilling me/testing me - it was more as if they really wanted to find the right fit. I heard from them again about a month later when they called and offered me the job, which I accepted on the spot. Then I started 2.5 weeks later.

**What did you highlight on your CV/Resume?**

Because MJFF works with the biotech company that I used to work at and had previously funded my thesis project/PI, I was in the unique position of having already been on both sides of the MJFF experience. I knew what it was like to be an awardee, and I also knew what it was like to work with them as a biotech partner. In addition to these experiences, I also highlighted my publications, my academic track record, and my passion for helping people. I think they could tell by meeting me that I was really excited about the prospect of working there, which definitely helped. I also highlighted my ability to present well and interact with people because these skills are critical at a job like this.

**Any last advice for those thinking about following a similar career track?**

It's never too early to contact someone on LinkedIn, even if there isn't an open position at your target company. I upgraded to LinkedIn Premium, which allows you to send in-mail to people you aren't connected with. This is helpful if you're trying to connect with someone at a specific company. Just establishing a connection can really help because they know you're interested in working for them long before the job is posted. I would always attach my resume but kept the in-mail itself brief - why I wanted to work there and a few key highlights from my resume, that's it. Also, networking is key. I went to a bunch of career fairs, called friends of friends, whatever I could. Finally, if you do want to transition to non-profit work, keep in mind that the salary isn't going to be as high as it might be in biotech or pharma, but it's so rewarding. There isn't a day that goes by that I ever wonder how what I'm doing might impact a patient someday. I never imagined being this happy to wake up every day and go to work!

**Thank you for reading!!**

**CNSPY Leadership Team**

*Co-founders - Thihan Paddukavidana, Rebecca Brown*

*Executive Board - Tenaya Vallery (President), Dan Mori (Vice Pres.), Claudio Bertuccio, Yixiao Zou, Deb Ayeni, Prabitha Natarajan.*

*Advisors - Yan Gao, Lu Lin, and Shalini Nag*

*Career Network SPYglass - Editor-in-Chief Victoria Schulman, Elaine Guevara, and Contributors*