

Swinging the Door Wide Open

never really thought of agriculture as research. We were *migrants*,” Laura Decanini recalls. “To us, agriculture was going out to work in the fields.”

“Our opportunities were slim to none,” adds her older sister Mari. Younger sister Diana agrees.

And yet, despite the odds, the transition from field hand to fledgling researcher happened three times in the same family.

It all started in 1985, when Mari first worked for the Agricultural Research Service. Between her junior and senior years of high school, she became a research apprentice in the Honey Bee Research Unit of the Subtropical Agricultural Research Laboratory (SARL) at Weslaco, Texas.

Two years later, fresh out of high school, Laura went to work for three different units at SARL. Younger sister Diana soon followed, finding her way to the sugarcane physiology project in SARL’s Conservation and Production Systems Research Unit.

Years have passed since those “foot in the door” days, and the three sisters have each established enviable scientific and technical career paths. Mari’s just wrapping up her Ph.D. in entomology and has accepted a job researching integrated pest management at the Texas A&M Experiment Station in Dallas.

Not to be outdone by her sister, Laura has accepted a graduate assistantship at Texas A&M in cotton fiber research. And the youngest sister, Diana graduated with a 4.0 average in mechanical engineering from the General Motors Institute in Michigan—in 3 years! She’s now settled into an engineering job in Virginia.

Today, this trio would stand out in any crowd. But let’s back up a few years.

As kids, they were much like the scores of children of other migrant workers whose families, during the summer, traveled from the Mexican border up to northern Texas, picking melons and onions all the way. Dirt was the

stuff you found under your fingernails, not what you placed under a microscope slide.

However, the eight Decanini children came equipped with a hidden advantage—parents who impressed on them the value of education. Their father was a teacher in Mexico. School came first.

Even so, getting started in the competitive field of science required more than fundamental education; it also took opportunity.

“We lived in the valley, only a couple of miles away from Weslaco,” says Mari. “The ARS research apprenticeship program introduced us to something at our own back door. Without it, we could have been a million miles away.”

The point is well taken. How important it is to have not only proximity, but real opportunity!

Which brings us to an underlying theme, often repeated in this issue of *Agricultural Research*: Today’s students are the scientists of tomorrow.

BOB NICHOLS
(K7398-1)



Diana Decanini

Rappin' Along

One of ARS' most successful student programs is the Research Apprenticeship Program for high school students, known as RAP. It is designed to stimulate interest in science and engineering careers among high school students who meet its eligibility criteria.

Korona I. Prince, civil rights director for ARS, says that some 3,000 students have worked a summer or two as ARS apprentices since the program began in 1980. After high school graduation, RAP students often move into the summer intern program, which has similar objectives to RAP, except that it's directed to college undergraduates. "Both programs provide an excellent opportunity for students to interact with research scientists and to gain firsthand experience in the research environment," says Prince.

What It's All About

In this special issue of *Agricultural Research*, we highlight the stories of only a handful of the students ARS has employed over the years. Some former students are now settled in careers very similar to the ARS jobs in which they got started. Others, however, have forged careers in different directions, ranging from managing a wildlife center to practicing medicine.

Floyd P. Horn, administrator of ARS, stresses the importance of recruiting students into the agricul-

tural sciences. Horn points out the advantages that experience with ARS affords a novice: "Whether collecting field data, dissecting insects, preparing tissue cultures, or purifying nucleic acids, firsthand exposure to research at ARS helps students cultivate a scientific mindset and a variety of research skills.

"Even more basic, though," says Horn, "is that it opens students' eyes to what agriculture is all about. It's not just farming. Today's agriculture is high tech, very sophisticated, and quite diverse. In fact, ARS research contributes to almost everything you find on today's supermarket shelves—from seedless red grapes, lactose-free dairy products, and cholesterol-fighting fat substitutes to disposable diapers and insect repellents."

Forging a Federal Career

Victor Commisso, personnel management specialist with the ARS Recruitment and Employment Policy Office, advises, "The best time to seek a federal career is while you're a student. If you're serious about working for the government, the time to pursue it is now."

Who's qualified? According to Commisso, there are temporary and career opportunities for students. "To be eligible for either, you must be at least 16 years old. And you must be at least a half-time student at an accredited high school, technical or vocational school, 2- or 4-year college or university, or graduate or professional school."

If you're interested in an ARS position, Commisso recommends checking regularly with your school's placement office. You may also apply directly to the ARS office located in your area. [Check the U.S. Government listings in your telephone directory.]

"Send that office a resume and a cover letter telling about your career interests and your interest in a student position," Commisso suggests.

For further information on ARS Student Programs, contact:

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