

Her Story **Professor Caroline McMillen**

“I think what a mentor often gives you is just that extra piece of advice that allows you to have the confidence that the decision you want to make is the right one.”

Professor Caroline McMillen

Caroline McMillen is the Chief Scientist for South Australia.

Never interested in science as a child, Caroline loved reading and read everything she could from her local library but she didn't pay much attention at school in Belfast, Northern Ireland where she grew up. When the family moved to a steel making town in England she found herself having to pay more attention. Though loving English and History, in her senior years it was Biology and understanding how the human body works that caught her interest. She started really enjoying maths and was intrigued by physics and chemistry; thinking of them being more of an art than a science.

Education

Though still interested in studying history at university, her extended family thought otherwise; at that time if a girl was good at science it was expected she would be a doctor. To her surprise she was accepted into Oxford University to study Physiological Sciences. She then moved on to do her PhD in Oxford following her interest in how babies grow and survive many challenges before birth. However, having a PhD wasn't considered as being a 'proper doctor' according to some in her extended Northern Irish family, so she completed her clinical training at Cambridge and became a medical doctor.

In retrospect she feels it was the passion for the creation of new knowledge that carried her along at Oxford and trying to understand more about what was not known. She also had an excellent mentor in one of her college tutors, who saw something in this young girl from a steel town and worked to support her. That experience led her to value the importance of mentors: "Great mentors are people who often see things in you that you haven't recognised in yourself and they help you understand how to find your path."

A change in direction

While working at a Children's Hospital in Edinburgh, her previous Oxford PhD supervisor who had returned to Australia offered her an academic position in Melbourne for a year. She has been in Australia ever since continuing to work on the challenges faced by babies before they are born and the consequences after. There are key questions to be addressed about how to improve care outcomes in high-risk pregnancies and how best to care for premature and sick newborns.

Throughout her working life she and her husband, who is a doctor, have juggled a busy family life. At one point they had three children under five years old, and she recalls those days saying "I know how difficult it is, when you have your baby across your shoulder trying to type out the research grant with one hand". Despite those challenges, she feels she wrote some of her best grants while heavily pregnant.

Leadership

Caroline always wanted to be a leading researcher and a research leader; to contribute to science, but also to support young people going into science, particularly women. Experience of research teams and universities led her to be interested in the requirements for good leadership. She wanted to understand how to create environments where world class work can be done. She stepped into leadership roles; first as head of a department and then as head of a faculty. Eventually, she became Deputy Vice Chancellor of Research and Innovation at UNISA, and then Vice Chancellor at Newcastle University. In 2018 she became the Chief Scientist of South Australia, a position she currently holds.

Advice for young women

"If you have a 'quiet' ambition to do something that can make a real difference to the world you live in but you worry whether you are the right person to even aim for that ambition because you are not sure of the path to achieve it or whether it could be achievable for you... I would say trust your inner voice, test that ambition, the journey may not be straightforward but never lose faith in yourself and keep moving through. There is everything to be gained from trusting that your future is in good hands - your own."

Women have made significant contributions to science throughout history. Nobel Prize winner Marie Curie; actress and inventor Hedy Lamarr; fossil hunter Mary Anning; and countless other extraordinary women have made important discoveries that have shaped our world. The incredible stories of these women are powerful, inspiring, staggeringly challenging and all around us.

By sharing these stories we present visible role models who can inspire, encourage and motivate the next generation of young women to follow their dreams and pursue careers in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM).

Her Story: Inspiring Women in STEM celebrates amazing women who are blazing their own trails and encouraging others to do the same. Their stories are honest and inspiring, and show that by following your passion, you can achieve anything.

Emily Hack

11 February 2020 – 10 May 2020

Professor Caroline McMillen

14 May 2020 – 16 August 2020

Pamela Melroy

20 August 2020 – 15 November 2020

Dr Rachael King

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