

Forsyth Tech Helps Unleash the “Inner Scientist” for Three Career Changers

Biotech Trek

Cindy Zimmerman worked in the auto parts business for 11 years. Tom Eaton was a university lecturer, and spent 20 years in operations management for two large companies and his own small print company. Jim Crawford worked in management for 20 years, and was laid off three times due to a downsizing, a takeover and a closing.

Cindy, Tom and Jim each arrived at a point in their earlier careers when they realized their professions were no longer serving them. Independently, they reached out to their local community college to explore possible educational and job options. All three ended up studying biotechnology at Forsyth Tech around the same time. They are now colleagues, applying skills from previous jobs to their current ones, supporting each other in the biotech field and loving every moment of their new-found careers. 

Cindy Zimmerman

Lab Technician,

Wake Forest Institute for Regenerative Medicine

Science and research always fascinated Cindy. When she left the auto parts business, she enrolled in the medical assisting program at her local community college. An instructor encouraged Cindy to switch to biotechnology. She spent one year at that college before transferring into Forsyth Tech's biotech program for the second year, which included an internship in a Wake Forest lab.

"During my internship, I helped a researcher conduct research on vascular disease," Cindy says. "That's when I discovered I loved the fine detail of dissection and microscope work. I knew I wanted to do research, and I wanted to do it at Wake Forest."

When she graduated in 2006 with her A.A.S. degree, she went into industry, working as a microbiology technician for a contract pharmaceutical company.

Two-and-a-half years later, she learned about an opening at the Institute for Regenerative Medicine (WFIRM), working in the lab of one of the world's foremost researchers in regenerative medicine, Dr. Tony Atala. Cindy jumped at the chance to get back into research.

She credits Forsyth Tech with helping her break into this field. "Forsyth Tech gave me the science background, knowledge of cell culture and lab

techniques, and the foundation for working in a research setting," she says.

Skills from her prior career in auto parts have transferred over. "I spent a lot of time doing inventory control in my old job. I actually use that training now to maintain inventory.

"Forsyth Tech gave me the foundation for working in a research setting."

"This is a great field for anyone with an aptitude for math and detail work. You also have to be patient — research takes a long time."



Tom Eaton

Lab Operations Manager,

Wake Forest Institute for Regenerative Medicine

Tom majored in biology at UNC-Wilmington and got his master's degree in ecology from NC State. After serving as a biology and botany lab lecturer at UNC-Wilmington, he spent 20 years in operations management for two Fortune 500 companies and ran his own small print communication company. After a while, his interest ran thin.



When his wife said, "You love to be around science," that got him thinking about biotechnology.

"Breaking into biotechnology seemed like a mountain too big to climb," Tom says.

So he looked to Forsyth Tech for help and was surprised by what he learned.

"Forsyth Tech put it all together for me."

The biotechnology faculty saw in Tom's background many relevant skills. They developed a customized, 1½-year course plan to bring Tom up to speed with current technologies and help him obtain a certificate to demonstrate competency.

"Forsyth Tech put it all together for me," says Tom. "They knew I had enough science to know what's important, and my industry experience was a plus."

Tom obtained a summer internship at WFIRM, where he remained until a lab technician position opened up. Then the lab doubled in size, and Tom's position grew with it. He now serves as a conduit between the faculty and the lab technicians.

"I took a nontraditional path to get here. I wouldn't have this job were it not for Forsyth Tech."

After seven years at WFIRM, Tom's enthusiasm for his job remains high. "I am still passionate about the work I'm doing at WFIRM," he says.

"This is my fourth career. This is the most enjoyable one. I'll be here until they kick me out."

Jim Crawford

GMP Operations/QC/R&D, KeraNetics, LLC

Jim is passionate about technology and lifelong learning, and is committed to having fun doing what he loves. This spring, at the age of 64, he inspired all who know him when he received his master's degree in bioethics from Wake Forest University.

Armed with an undergraduate degree in biology and 20 years in corporate management, Jim enrolled in Forsyth Tech's biotechnology program in 2004, having decided he wanted to pursue a career that matched up with his personal interests.

As part of his training, Jim took an internship with WFIRM and fell in love with the research environment. He was hired full time when a lab position opened up in 2005.

Jim always knew he eventually wanted to work with a biotech spinoff and development company, and expressed



that goal while working at WFIRM. Four years later, a professor formed a spinoff called KeraNetics, remembered Jim's long-term goals, and asked Jim to join him.

"Make sure you share your goals whenever you can," Jim advises. "Someone will hear about it and may be able to open a door for you.

"I was hired because I came across as a team player, and I have fun, because I'm doing what I love," he says. "Getting a job isn't just about the ability to do a job."

The biotech field, Jim points out, is constantly evolving, and job-seekers have to evolve with it. Early on, the A.A.S. can get you in the door, but keeping credentials

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current is critical. "If you haven't used your degree in seven years, you don't have credentials," he says.

"My A.A.S. degree from Forsyth Tech re-established 'employment relevancy' for my original bachelor's in biology earned way back in 1973. It breathed new life into my previous education."

"Forsyth Tech's training is second to none."

Jim is already putting his master's degree to work: This fall, he will teach a new course at Forsyth Tech: Bioethics.

GREAT GRADS

Forsyth Tech's biotech program, one of the best in the state, introduces students to cutting-edge research through internships with local labs. Often those internships lead to job offers after graduation.

"We continue to be amazed by the graduates of the Forsyth Tech Biotechnology program who have joined our institute," says Anthony Atala, MD, director of the Wake Forest Institute for Regenerative Medicine.

"This is a high-quality program whose graduates are prepared to make important contributions to our mission. Thanks to our partnership with Forsyth Tech, we can count on having a talented pool of biotechnology personnel to meet our employment needs."