

SHE SQUEEZES FAME INTO HER BUSY SCHEDULE

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My friend Pat is famous.

Quite suddenly, for no reason other than that she excels at what she does, which for a significant portion of the past 20 years has amounted to sitting in a small, windowless room with pale walls, pale floors, babies and a box full of stuffed bears who play drums when the babies look at them.

The point of the bears and the babies is to figure out how the brain works, which is why in the last month when you opened The New York Times, or Newsweek or Time, or turned on "The Today Show" or "Good Morning America," there was Dr. Patricia Kuhl.

Up until a couple of weeks ago, Pat kept busy with a bushel-basket full of roles that would have taxed the equanimity of any normal brilliant person.

She was, depending on the time of day, chairwoman of the University of Washington's department of speech and hearing sciences, board member at the prestigious Scripps Neuroscience Research Group in California, car-pool driver for daughter Katherine, wife to brilliant husband Andy Meltzoff, invited lecturer at distinguished conferences in exotic locales from Tokyo to Oslo, Starbucks habitue and sometimes sensationally dressed dinner party host.

This seemed to most of her friends enough, maybe more than enough. Andy says he and Pat tried for four months to plan a weekend getaway for just the two of them. They could never both get the same weekend. They finally reduced it to 36 hours at a downtown hotel, and they ended up chopping that to 28 hours.

They were, in other words, busy people. Then out of left field, otherwise known as Washington, D.C., came the request that turned Pat into media magnet and first lady sidekick.

Pat was one of six scientists invited to speak last month at a White House conference on early childhood development. At the insistence of Hillary Clinton, she then accompanied the first lady on the morning television talk-show circuit.

There is in each of us, I think, a craving for recognition, maybe even that famous 15 minutes of fame. This is a pretty understandable thing. Everyone wishes the world could see and appreciate what they do. This desire must be especially acute among research scientists, who spend countless lonely hours working in research so specialized they can barely explain what they do to their families.

If they do come to public attention, it might be as objects of some politician's derision for wasting tax dollars on frivolous experiments.

Pat's research is not frivolous. She has labored for 20 years in the same UW lab, trying to figure out how kids learn to talk. She and her collaborators have spent a good portion of those two decades in that room with the bears. What they have emerged with is how quickly children acquire the basis of language - within the first year of life - and the extent to which that learning is influenced by hearing those around them speak.

The work hasn't been without reward.

For one thing, she met Andy when they collaborated on a study in 1982. And in the last few years her research has come to the attention of a whole new group of people who have bet millions of dollars on the idea that computers can recognize and translate human speech.

These people take the knowledge that babies learn very quickly how to distinguish among useful sounds as a near guarantee that computers will eventually be able to do the same thing.

Still, this was a special audience. Microsoft came to call.

Katie Couric did not.

When she did, it was not an event without complexity. There was the question of how to communicate complex science to the unscientific, followed by questions like how much time should you spend doing this, with whom, at the expense of what? As nice as it is out of the windowless room, when should you go back? Do you do science or talk about it?

As Andy says, "It's unobvious how to solve the problem."

Pat seems to manage. She has handled more than 100 media inquiries, not to mention hundreds more questions from concerned parents. This bloom of celebrity will probably pass, but the buzz of the science itself is apt to get louder still.

"The next five years is just going to be wild," Pat says.

Oh yeah, and the last five have been what, tame?

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