

# The University of Michigan Department of Urology

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## What's New May 26, 2017



### Dr. Vesna Ivancic

#### Urology Department Faculty and Staff

#### 4 Items, 24 Minutes

Today, we hear from Dr. Vesna Ivancic, who provides us with a fantastic glimpse at the experiences that molded her into who she is today, along with an update on some of her recent professional efforts and family life.

I'll be brief in my introduction, as Dr. Ivancic has put together a truly wonderful contribution, and I don't want to keep you from it for too long. I'll just thank Dr. Ivancic for all the effort and consideration she put into this piece, it is enlightening, personal and thoughtfully written, setting a great example to which all future contributors can aspire. At one point in her What's New, Dr. Ivancic floats the idea of writing a book, and after reading through today's edition, I wholeheartedly endorse that idea.

So, without further ado, here's Dr. Vesna Ivancic.

-Eric Anderson

*Dr. Vesna Ivancic*

Part One: A good student: Learning to Master

I chose academia because I want to teach. Because I descend from generations of professors. Engineers and architects, lawyers and doctors, athletes

and home economics instructors, but all of them teachers. And growing up I gained immense satisfaction and joy from learning. My first teachers set a bar that has rarely been reached. My mother, a veterinarian, taught me to read and write years before school started, then diagrammed cardiac circulation for me in elementary school. Growing up, I assumed everyone's mom understood pulmonary venous return. She remains the Olympic champion of motherhood to this day. Any gifts I have with children, whether my own or other people's, pale in comparison to hers. My father, Job's hero, taught me to love the axiomatic nature of mathematics, modeling how important a strong foundation is to any type of learning. Despite frustrating me by forcing me to learn math in Croatian, he was the first man to set the expectation that I could achieve anything boys aspire to achieve. For girls in our society, that understanding is not obvious partly due to contradictory social messages and it is because of him that I never had a lower score than any boy in any math class I ever took.



(Nik, Lada and Vesna back in Croatia)

The Silicon Valley of my California childhood was an immigrant community where, true to stereotypes, education was valued above all else. Early on I demonstrated an aptitude for the challenges of immersing oneself in the mastery of a subject. Motivation and success were easier to come by in those days. In retrospect, it is clear to me that this was due to the luxury of **selfishness**. For hours, every day, I studied as much as I wanted to. For hours, every day, I trained as much as I wanted to. For hours, every day, I played piano as much as I wanted

to. And I read books. As many books as I could get my hands on during the day and with a flashlight under the covers deep into the night. Every single one of these selfish luxuries contributed to my "success" and in this working mom phase of my life, I miss them in a profound way. Even the selfish two minutes I disappear to pee and wash my hands, the only moments of "getting away" I remember from internship, are no longer moments to myself as a mom. Inevitably a child will decide I am needed at precisely that moment and storm in to ask, emergently, what I'm doing and whether this shoe is on the right foot and if this is a day that I go to work again or stay home. My literal four-year old, who now calls me by my first name because "that's your *real* name, right?" also declared this week that my "*real* name means work, work, work." Then again, he also piped up, during our trip to Chicago last month, while driving through a shady part of town, that he "thought this was a gentrified neighborhood!" He has an interesting way with language.



(Darwin has read all the "Nate the Great" books and believes he is a detective)

I can picture in my head and hear in my heart every single one of my gifted teachers growing up. Ms. Wilcoxon received me in 1<sup>st</sup> grade, not speaking a word of English, and somehow taught me enough that Ms. Starr, in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, awarded me the "best reader in the class" teddy bear ("Cocoa" is currently a favorite of my 2-year-old's). Mr. Blancett would sneak me 4<sup>th</sup> grade material and send me to the 5<sup>th</sup> grade class for reading and math in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. He told my parents I would BE somebody if only I could improve my penmanship. Mrs. Olevson chose me as the only girl on the "AudioVisual team" which was largely appealing since Mitchell Wong was

also on the AV team. She then hosted an epic pool party at her house at the end of 4<sup>th</sup> grade, took off her bob wig (as promised all year long) and showed us her hula-dancer-REAL-hair-down-to-her-bottom! It would have been the perfect day if only Mitchell Wong, of AV Team fame and the boy I admired for at least five consecutive years of elementary school, hadn't decided to start drowning in the deep end of the pool. Naturally this required my chaperone-turned-hero mother to jump in and rescue him, cementing the impossibility of our love. Mrs. Baker, whose husband played the piano for our choir practices, still wrote me letters of encouragement in college.



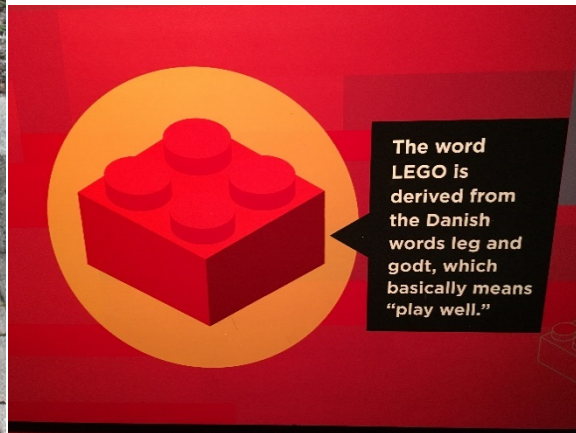
(Me, at 2 and Eviebear, at 2) (She looks a little like me, huh?)



On and on it goes. My brilliant piano teacher Claire Lohnes. My freshman basketball coach, Mr. Lax (who was anything but). My varsity volleyball and basketball coach, Mr. Lamb, who taught me that in sports I'm only aggressive enough when angry. I had only ever avoided anger, had never known how to channel it productively and was surprised by the remarkable clarity of purpose and decisiveness it brings. The resources in A2/Saline schools far exceed what we had in that small Milpitas public school system but the teachers here are no better.



(Owen, 14, Eve, 2, Darwin, 4 and Lucy 11)



## Part Two: A great teacher: Witnessing Mastery

The best of the best, W. Dean Harman, taught chemistry for majors, at the University of Virginia. UVa was not the plan but my parents were clear that they could only afford in-state tuition so I could only afford in-state college applications. No applying to Stanford, as I had always dreamed. Luckily, when I traded in my Northern California "Doesn't everyone's dad work on computers?" high school for my Northern Virginia "Doesn't everyone's dad work for the government?" high school, I also landed in the state with the best public university in the country. It was there, over and over again, at the office hours of Professor Harman that I was inspired to master teaching.

Dean Harman, to the consternation of many students who would address him as "Dean Harman," was not a Dean, it was just his name. He was tall and mustached, lecturing on inorganic chemistry with a soft voice and the largest pieces of chalk we had ever seen. In jeans and polo shirts, his hair just a few weeks overdue for a trim, he looked like he belonged in one my father's software companies. Besides, he had studied at Stanford so I liked him immediately. I asked him once if he thought I could get in to Stanford Medical School. He admitted he honestly didn't know as there were very few spots. Professor Harman had no powerpoint slides, no transparencies to copy down. Like most other students in the class, I showed up with a fully charged recording device as well as a notebook and listened to the tapes of his lectures over and over again until I understood almost all of it. I then wrote detailed questions about the parts I didn't understand, and showed up at every office hours he posted.

The poor man must have prayed he would open his office door just one time and not find me standing there, waiting. It didn't happen. Not for a year. Chemistry was the white whale to my Ahab. If you request my college transcript that "A" stands out from all the others because it is written in blood. As much as I loved Physics and Biology, I hated Chemistry with its invisible processes and opacity. As my sister would say, I hated it with the passion of a thousand burning suns. And yet I loved Dean Harman. And the more he explained, the more my hate faded. It's not just that I didn't want to disappoint a great teacher. It's that **he wouldn't allow it** to happen. He would patiently explain a concept and if I still failed to grasp it I would apologize and promise to go home and think about it some more. He would always stop me. "No no, Vesna, that's not your job. *I must not be explaining*

*it well enough. Let me think of another way to explain it."* It had never before occurred to me that the fault of not understanding could be anyone's but mine. And I would sit there. And I would wait. And he would think. And always he would produce yet another analogy, yet another visual model until I understood. Professor Harman's teaching style was effective because he was wholly committed to the **shared responsibility of the teacher-student relationship**. He saw his role not only as one who transmits information but ensures it is received as intended. In the same way I had previously watched Magic Johnson and Claudio Arrau, I watched Dean Harman and thought "I want to do *that*."

Years later, when I received the letter from Harvard Medical School, I wondered for days where I should open it. My dorm room seemed enticingly private in case the letter required crying (high likelihood) but amidst the gym shoes and gummy bears it just seemed wrong. So did the cafeteria, my boyfriend's apartment, the Lawn, and pretty much every gorgeous square foot of Mr. Jefferson's University. None of them seemed to symbolize what had gone into that application. Until I walked into the lobby of the Chemistry Building. Through the window in the door of the Inorganic Chemistry classroom I saw my little sister, before she was a world-famous Marine Mammal Radiologist, chatting excitedly with her friends. Class hadn't started yet, and there, at the chalkboard, with an enormous piece of white chalk, was Dean Harman. I opened my backpack, pulled out the letter and opened it. To this day, I only remember reading the first words: "Dear Vesna, We are pleased to..." before bursting into the class and wordlessly handing it to my sister. She was the first person to know. And to hug me. The second was Dean Harman. "That's better than Stanford, kid" he whispered. I wonder if he could ever know how many things I really meant when I simply said "Thank you."



(Dr. Marina Ivančić, first head of a Radiology Dept at a Zoo)

### Part Three: Finding My Students: Two wrongs DO make a right

I assumed, as all mistakes begin, that when I joined a faculty, I would eventually be a residency director. Either that or the assistant residency director or maybe medical student clerkship director. My biggest mistake was in believing that these were the only choices for someone who is primarily interested in teaching but also practices as a urologist. Even after I learned that being a residency director deals, in large part with filling out site visit paperwork, I still thought, Yup, this is what I should do because I really want to teach. I made it clear to the Department that this is what I wanted. Thankfully, our Department didn't agree. They had more faith in other people to do all of those jobs and I'm sure they do a great job at them. But I almost gave up then. My second mistake.

#### **NASA Chooses Lovell**

In 1962, NASA needed a second group of astronauts for the upcoming Gemini and Apollo programs. Although rejected as one of the original seven Mercury astronauts, Lovell applied again and was accepted into NASA Astronaut Group 2. Lovell later said, "If you want to be successful as an astronaut or as anything else, you have to keep trying."



(Darwin, 4 and Lucy, 11)

History is rife with tales of excellence and success arising, phoenix-like, from the depths of failure. Unfortunately I lack the defiant attitude that typically serves as the motivation. You know those people. The ones who say: "The world doesn't think I can do this? You don't think I can do this? Well, I'm going to show you I can do EXACTLY that and BETTER!" Surgeons are often that way. Surgeons have something to prove to someone. Even if it's just themselves. It's part of what drives us. A chip on the shoulder. It goes way back and is largely responsible for



choosing a rewarding but masochistic life. A defiance of authority comes in handy.



(Evie, fearless, and built for defiance)

I was not built that way. I follow rules. I have never paid a bill late. I never got detention. I never say bad words. I have never been drunk. Never needed a curfew or grounding. Never disobeyed my parents. Never brought home anything less than an A, even in college. I never found school to be easy, never failed to do my homework, never blew off responsibilities. So if someone I respect in a position of authority says we don't have faith in you to do this, it doesn't occur to me to defy that. My instinct was to say "Okay, I'm just not good at teaching urology/medicine/surgery and will go find something else to be good at."

My husband, a Kindergarten teacher for many years, believes everything you really need to know (about life and interacting with people) you learn in Kindergarten. It's part of what inspired him to teach that age: teaching children to respect others, take turns, recognize when to ask for help, build self-esteem and independence, figure things out for themselves. I should write a book someday entitled "Everything you really need to know, you learn when you become a mom." How quickly I would brush off the idea, if one of our children brought it home, that they ought to define themselves by what others believed they could or could not do! Why could I not apply that to myself?



(The ridiculously cute Cochells: Darwin, Evie, Lucy, Owen and Brian at Shedd)

For too many years, and by too many people, and in too many subjects, I was told I could teach well. A surgeon I once dated told me he was interested to see what great thing I would do in the world. I told him I highly doubted I would do something great. He laughed at me. As it turned out, my friends were right—he wasn't a very nice person. But he did say a very nice thing. He said I was like a rock, thrown in a certain trajectory, and my landing site was predictable. And it was high. Oyster-like, I have rolled that sentiment over and over in my mind for years until the pearl was visible. So many people were responsible for that launching. They couldn't all be wrong. **And they were owed a certain landing.** But how would I achieve great things when I wasn't successful in the expected ways at work?

Urology has afforded me a good number of valuable failures so far. And each time, they have made me better and stronger and more able to recognize who I really am and what I really care about. I wish I'd had more failures growing up, honestly, and will make that a priority with my parenting. Without the mistakes of thinking I wanted to be a residency director or medical student clerkship director and without the mistake of concluding I should stop trying to teach, I might never have discovered my passion for Patient and Family Education.



(MESP 2016-2017: Best. Class. Ever.)

My current project, a multidisciplinary effort to create a comprehensive multi-media family curriculum for pediatric urology, has already resulted in acceptance to the Medical Education Scholars Program, a grant to fund an artist, and numerous ideas for research opportunities within the education realm. It is not because I now know how to aim questions at different levels of Bloom's taxonomy or frame outcomes in terms of Kirkpatrick levels, but rather through collaborations and mentorship within MESP that I finally have some ideas on how to turn projects that I love and already work on into scholarship. With the help of Boyer I have now learned that what we typically acknowledge as "research" is only the scholarship of discovery but there are equally valuable forms of scholarship in integration, application and education largely unemphasized in my previous training.

This year we have been working on narrated videos, website and project design, white-board drawings and cartoons, as well as ways to display and organize information using Plain Language and intuitive tables/graphs/charts. It is as exciting and challenging as I expected. Patient and Family Education must be conceptualized in ways that differ from our traditional teaching of medical students and residents. It appeals to my love of creative analogies and visual representations. It also requires focused input from a great many disciplines which creates the atmosphere of teamwork I have always loved.

#### Part Four: Doctor. Docere. To Teach

It is such a direct and obvious thought, that the patients, themselves, should be my primary students. It is also powerful and far-reaching in its potential to improve informed consent, shared decision-making, patient satisfaction and

hopefully, as a result, patient health. "It may not happen quickly," Dr. Kelly promised us in class this year, but "your area will discover you." Last week in clinic, I had two patients confirm this thought for me.

The first was a family that drove from four hours away to see me specifically. I don't get people referred to me in Michigan because I'm the reconstructive specialist. Or the robotic specialist. Or the stone specialist. But the mom's first words were that she wanted to see me specifically to discuss her daughter's reflux. Any pediatric urologist could have done that. "If you knew how much research had gone into coming to see you specifically, Ma'am, you wouldn't believe it" said the dad, giving his wife and her legal pad list of neatly written questions, a familiar look. I smiled at them. "I get it," I said. "My husband tells me I'm crazy every day. It's called being a mom." I gave her our handout to take home, promising that it explains most questions then said, "Now let's do the list!" She smiled back and we went through every question. I taught her what I know about reflux. She taught me what she knows about her kid. Now we're a team.

The second was a mom who rescheduled an appointment with me for the third time to discuss her son's flimsy penile adhesions. In pediatric urology this is a "nothing" problem. A "go-away-by-itself" problem. She had already seen another pediatric urologist who told her as much but said she made an appointment with me because she "heard I would explain things to her." By the end of the visit we came up with the same plan as the previous physician had done, for which I apologized. "Nope," she smiled, "it feels completely different now that I understand."



This is my new definition of success. It doesn't come with a different title. It's been there all along. I'm already teaching who I'm meant to be teaching. They are the reason I practice medicine. They are the purpose and reward of every work day. I don't need different learners. I need to find ways to teach patients better. Those who strive for excellence in teaching know the responsibility for achieving that understanding lies with us.