

It may seem that the most interesting subjects for a profile would be people who are extremely well known. That is not necessarily the case, as Stephanie Guzik shows in the following profile of Diane Turcotte, a fellow college student whose life is not limited to the time she spends "Behind a Plain White Lab Coat." As you read this profile, notice the different ways Guzik helps readers see how remarkable Diane Turcotte is.

Stephanie Guzik

## Behind a Plain White Lab Coat

After an exhausting day of classes one Monday afternoon early in the semester, I decided to walk across campus to the cell culture lab to feed my fibroblast cells. As I lazily walked up the three flights of stairs to the biology floor and wandered slowly into room 309, I saw Diane Turcotte's smiling face peer up from her computer screen. According to our instructor, George, Diane was the pride of our Cancer Cell Group. He often told me, "You could learn a lot from that girl. She's a wonderful, dedicated member of this group," and I always had to hold back from asking, "What could this senior possibly teach me about this program that you couldn't?" I always seemed to run into Diane whenever I went to the lab; in fact, it often made me wonder if she ever left. 1

On this particular Monday afternoon, Diane was waiting for the components of a reagent solution to dissolve in a beaker of distilled water and writing a paper for one of her classes in the meantime. "Hey Steph!" she called out cheerfully. "How was your day?" I looked at her, feeling somewhat dazed, and replied, "How in the world can you be so extremely perky after classes on a Monday?" She just smiled and went back to her paper. I put down my bag, grabbed my lab notebook, and went across the hall into the sterile culture lab, closing the door behind me. 2

I prepared myself in the lab, setting up all my equipment, washing my hands, and putting on my plain white lab coat. I logged into 3

the lab in the notebook that we keep on top of the refrigerator and went to open up the incubator. I took my two large culture flasks off the second shelf and looked at them under the microscope. One appeared very clear, with a good growth of cells, while the other had black blotches floating in the bright orange growth medium. I wasn't sure what to do, but I fed my cells anyway, cleaned up the lab, and left, saying goodbye to a still-perky Diane as I walked out.

Thursday rolled around and it was once again time to feed my cells. After class, I wandered over to the lab, trudged up the stairs, and walked slowly down the hall. Once again, Diane was in room 309, this time waiting for proteins to run through her polyacrilamide gel. "Is today any better?" she asked. "Well, it's not a Monday; we'll put it that way," I replied as I put my things down and went back into the sterile lab across the hall. I prepared everything again and went to

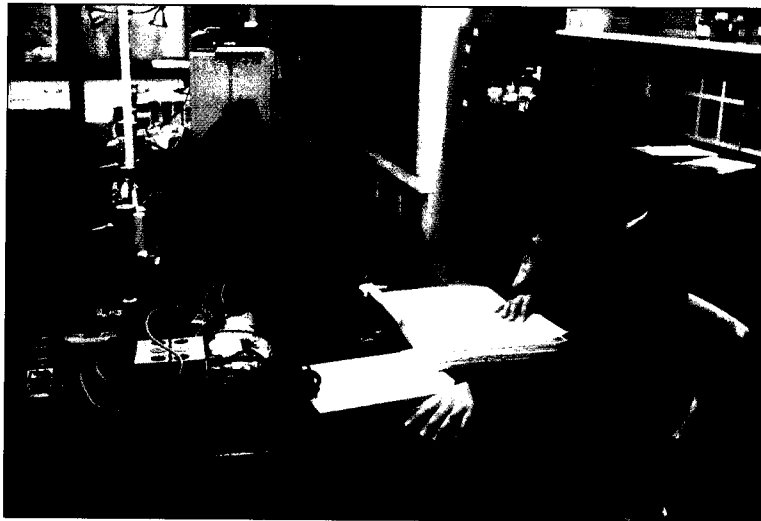


Fig. 1. Diane at work in the lab.

open up the incubator in the lab. As I swung the door open, I immediately noticed a flask on the second shelf with bright yellow growth medium: a clear sign of contamination. My stomach dropped as I saw the letters SG on the bottom of the flask. I took out both of my cultures and saw that the one was bright yellow and the other was cloudy orange, which meant I had killed all the cells I had been growing for almost three weeks. I closed the incubator, took off my plain white lab coat, and went back into room 309 with both of my flasks.

Diane was hunched over her gel, waiting patiently for the proteins to be pulled to the bottom by the current running through the apparatus. She saw me as I walked in, somewhat frustrated. I quietly asked, "Does this happen to you?" Diane took one look at the flasks I held outstretched and understood. She smiled and replied, "Actually, this is perfect timing. I've been growing roller bottles of cells for about a month now and had finally gotten a culture to grow, but today I came in and they had all 'jumped off.' So I get to start all over too. Come on, let's go." She turned off the current running through her gel, took the apparatus apart, and walked past me into the sterile lab. I put down my contaminated flasks long enough to put on my lab coat again. Still frustrated, I squirted bleach into my two flasks to kill off all the bacteria and remaining cells, while Diane washed her hands and put on her plain white lab coat. We sat there together in that lab, passaging new cells from one flask into another, for a little under an hour. In that hour, I began to understand what our instructor had been talking about.

As we sat down at the sterile hoods to begin working, Diane said, "Stephanie, you can't give up. That's what I've learned in this place. I've spent three years in this room, and no matter how many flasks and roller bottles I've gone through, no matter how many cells I've stained incorrectly, no matter how many gels I've run, I finally realized that getting frustrated over this stuff is completely pointless. Cell culture is not your whole life. There's so much beyond this one little room that is much more important than passaging these cells into a new flask."

It struck me as funny that this woman who I had seen so many 7  
times in the lab was talking about everything outside of the lab. But  
one hour in the lab talking with Diane convinced me that she is not  
only the amazing and dedicated cell culturist George told me about,  
but also such an active participant in so many campus activities that  
she far outshines every other student I have met in my time here. I  
came to realize that behind Diane's plain white lab coat is a woman  
who has had a full life at college, who has experienced everything,  
and who has made her time on campus one to remember and  
cherish. Behind it was someone I wanted to be like.

Whereas I simply go to class, go to the lab, go back to my dorm, 8  
and occasionally go out with my friends (and to this point thought  
that I was doing pretty well!), I discovered that Diane has an entire  
spectrum of things to do once she walks down that staircase out of  
the lab. Our college is known to have students who struggle to do  
well in their classes and struggle even more to have a good time  
while at school because classes outweigh the rest of their activities.  
Diane has certainly overcome that challenge.

Diane told me she's taking a Senior Advanced Lab course based 9  
in Molecular Biology, a Statistical Analysis course, and Immunology  
and Human Physiology. In all, she said, it adds up to seventeen hours  
of class time each week, not including the several hours of home-  
work required by each class. It was clear to me that even though she  
is a senior, Diane had chosen courses that are quite difficult and  
time-consuming—unlike other seniors, who coast through their last  
two semesters with less intellectually challenging courses like Intro-  
duction to Sculpture. The only response I could manage was, "That's  
amazing." "It's not too bad," Diane replied. "I just go to class, do all of  
my work after class either here or in the library, and then I have time  
to do everything else I want to do." *Everything else? What else could  
there be*, I wondered. *I'm having enough of a hard time balancing  
school, the lab, and my sorority.*

Diane belongs to the same sorority I do on campus, so I know 10  
how much time she spends at the house. She has been a member

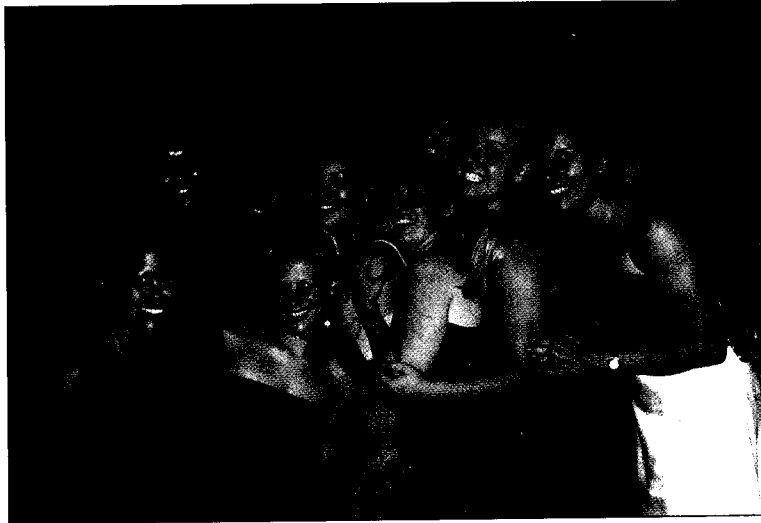


Fig. 2. Sorority sisters after a formal. Diane is the third from the left in the middle row.

since her freshman year and is so kind and enthusiastic that all the sisters adore her. I have yet to find a sister who has anything bad to say about Diane, and I believe Melissa put it best when she told me, "Diane is just your average, run-of-the-mill amazing person."

Until I started working in the Cancer Cell Group, I never would have guessed that Diane was so involved in academics, simply because the majority of people on our campus who are extremely involved in their courses don't seem very happy or relaxed. However, Diane is an exception. During recruitment periods for our sorority, she is constantly at the house, socializing with the sisters and the potential members. She is so relaxed that no one could guess that she'd be heading back to the lab afterwards. When recruitment is over, Diane can still be found hanging out at the

house a few times during the week or getting ice cream at the local Friendly's with some of the other senior sisters.

Although I knew about Diane's sorority involvement, before this 12  
 afternoon in the lab I had no idea that she cared about any activities  
 beyond that and her coursework. But she told me about several  
 other groups on campus that are important to her. First, there's  
 CASA—the Chinese American Student Association. When Diane came  
 to college, she initially wanted to be a member of the Vietnamese  
 Student Association, but since our campus didn't have one, she  
 decided to join CASA instead to "embrace her Asian ethnicity." "It's  
 really nice to be able to associate with people that have a similar  
 background to me," Diane said. "I grew up in a house that embraced  
 Vietnamese culture, and I wanted to continue that feeling once I got  
 to campus."

Second, she told me about TriBeta, which is a national Biology 13  
 Honor Society. Our campus has not established a definite chapter of  
 TriBeta, but Diane, along with some other biology students, is work-  
 ing very hard to get the campus TriBeta group recognized nationally.  
 For the past year she has acted as the secretary of the campus Tri-  
 Beta group, and she is currently in the process of contacting the rep-  
 resentative who will come examine our facilities to make sure that  
 we have met the national society's requirements. She is also actively  
 recruiting students to become a part of the group she helped estab-  
 lish. "Right now, TriBeta is a lot of work just because we don't have  
 our chapter established yet, but once the menial labor is done, it  
 should be a lot of fun," she said enthusiastically.

After she told me about her involvement in CASA and TriBeta, I 14  
 was expecting Diane to say something along the lines of "Between  
 those groups and my coursework, I'm fairly busy." Instead, she  
 continued, "I'm also part of the Order of Omega for being a sorority  
 sister and for meeting the requirements." Although Diane said this  
 modestly, I personally know that being a member of this, the national  
 Greek Honor Society, is much more than "meeting requirements"; it

has to do with being a leader, being active—basically being amazing in one way or another.

Finally, Diane added that she lives at home, which is close to campus, and spends as much time as she can with her family and her two nephews. She usually goes home for dinner and spends a little time with her parents, then goes back to the lab to work for most of the night. *I have trouble seeing my friends on a weekly basis, I thought, but she makes sure she spends time with her family every night. How does she do it? How can she be so active on campus, so wonderful in her coursework, and yet so involved at home?* I just didn't get it. While I sat there absorbing what Diane had told me, she decided to add that she also does work-study for our instructor, spending some time testing new products that George is considering for purchase, purifying reagents that the group uses on a regular basis, and organizing and cleaning the lab. Was I sitting next to some sort of machine? "Oh, and I also had to study for my GRE's all semester because I wasn't sure if I wanted to go to graduate school or go directly into a lab to work." After Diane took the exam and thought about it a lot, she decided to look for a research position and work for a few years. *Yes, indeed, there is a machine behind that plain white lab coat, I decided. There has to be. No one could possibly be so active and yet seem so relaxed at the same time.*

There was an awkward silence after Diane told me about everything she did. I didn't know what to say. All I could think of was "wow," but somehow I didn't feel that would do any justice to what I had just heard.

As we were doing our final steps for the passaging, I decided to ask, "So what about sleep? Do you ever sleep?" Diane just smiled, like she always does, and said, "Of course I sleep. It's not always as much as I'd like, and it's not as much as some of the other students on campus, but I get my rest. Sometimes I'm in the lab for anywhere from 5 to 24 hours in a day doing protocols, so when it's a busy night with work and with the lab, I get anywhere from no sleep to 3 hours. On nights when I'm not quite so busy, I get around 6 hours. It's not

so bad once you get used to it." *No sleep? Who does that?* That's all I could think as we capped up our flasks and labeled them with the date and our initials.

By that time, it was around 7 o'clock. I was completely exhausted and still trying to absorb everything Diane had just told me. We put our flasks in the incubator—mine on the second shelf and hers on the top shelf. We cleaned up the hoods and all our materials. We washed our hands. We took off our plain white lab coats. 18

Then I followed Diane out of the sterile lab and into room 309. She went back over to her gel as I put away my lab notebook. As she sat there preparing her gel for a Western blot protocol, which would take about another five hours or so, I thought to myself, *The poor thing is going to be stuck in the lab all night again.* But then I realized that whereas I would be "stuck" in the lab, she would simply "be" in the lab, enjoying just one of the many tasks in the busy life that she leads. 19

As I put my bag on my back, Diane said with a smile, "Are you going out tomorrow night?" This time, I smiled back. "I know a couple of the sisters are going out, and Vanessa and I definitely are. Would you like to come with us?" As always, Diane smiled, looked at her gel, and said, "If all goes well with this thing, I'm with you. Just let me know what time." 20

"Of course," I said, and turned to walk out the door. "Have a good night," I added. As I walked to the door I heard Diane say, "You too. Don't forget, there's a whole different place outside of that door. Take advantage of it while you can." I smiled and slowly walked out of room 309, down the hallway, and down the stairs in a better mood than I had been at any other time during the past few weeks. I felt inspired, still touched by my conversation with the amazing woman I had discovered hidden behind a plain white lab coat. 21

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# Writing in a Visual Age

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