

She's at home with chemistry

Professor Dea runs lab with hospitality

By Ann Grifflth
Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES — You might say Phoebe Dea is the mother of chemistry at Cal State Los Angeles.

In 1976, the San Marino resident became the first female professor in the history of the department, and is one of only two women in the 18-professor department now. She didn't know she was a pioneer when she came to the university.

"It's a good thing I didn't know it then," Dea said. "If I thought about it, it would have worried me more. Sometimes it's good to be a little naive."

Dea said she likes to create a second home for students in her chemistry laboratory. Most of her students eat lunch in the lab, and she extends this hospitality into her own home by inviting her students to dinner.

Grace Dy, 24, of Glendale has worked in Dea's lab for two years.

"She's sort of like a parent besides being a professor," Dy said.

Since she graduated in June 1990, Dy returns regularly to Dea's lab to get advice.

Dy said Dea convinced her to tell her parents when she retook her medical school entrance examinations. Dy initially decided not to tell her parents she was retaking the exam for fear she would disappoint them if her scores weren't better,

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but Dea told her they would just be glad to know she was trying.

In September, Dea — who specializes in analytical chemistry — was named California Professor of the Year for outstanding research and undergraduate teaching by the Council for Advancement and support of Education in Washington, D.C. She was selected out of 26 candidates teaching at public and private colleges throughout the state. Her award cited the number of her students who go on to graduate programs, many of whom are minorities and women.

Dea, who was born in China, said she thinks seeing a minority woman and a mother of two succeeding in a scientific career is a good example to students. Her female students sometimes ask her about balancing a family and a career, she said.

"They're a little afraid to try to plan a family and a career," Dea said. "Sometimes you just have to go ahead and take the plunge and usually things will work out."

Dea said she is used to being a woman among men and that it doesn't intimidate her. After graduating from UCLA with a degree in chemistry, she went on to get a doctorate in chemistry from Caltech. When she graduated in 1967, all undergraduates were male and only 38 of 778 graduate students were female.

"(Women's) restrooms were very hard to find, I tell you," Dea said.

Joseph Casanova, a fellow member of the chemistry faculty at Cal State Los Angeles, has known Dea since she came to the university in 1976. He says she's appreciated for her success in getting federal research grants for the department and is an optimistic person who cheers up her peers — something that is particularly important given the state university system's recent financial cutbacks.

"In her steadiness, hard work and optimism, she's always upbeat and you can always count on her saying something positive," he said.

Dea is a busy woman, but says she finds time to read science-fiction novels written by Michael Crichton — a hobby she picked up from her son, now a sophomore at Brown University. Although she doesn't get to read as much as she would like, she says when she picks up a good book, she can't quit until she is finished reading it.

"You make time for it, you know — dinner can wait," she said. "I think it's true we always find time for the things we like to do."

One of Us



Breaker of tradition: Phoebe Dea of San Marino is Cal State L.A.'s first female chemistry professor. Paul Morse / Star-News