

Frances Separovic 'Bluestocking' sees red about the media treatment of women



If it hadn't been for the Whitlam Government abolishing university fees, Frances Separovic would not be where she is today – Head of Chemistry at the University of Melbourne and the first woman to occupy the position. In August she wowed the audience at the Bluestocking Week event at the University of Melbourne with a witty and passionate account of her life. Carmel Shute reports.

Professor Separovic has notched up a number of firsts in her career – in 1996 she became the first woman reader in her department; in 2005 its first female professor; and, this year, was the first woman chemist to be elected to the Academy of Science. Her achievements are all the more remarkable since she never studied chemistry at university and comes from a first generation migrant working-class family in Broken Hill.

Frances migrated from Yugoslavia at the age of three and a half, a trip she still remembers.

'Dad had a cousin in Broken Hill and we ended up there because he didn't really know the difference between Australia and America,' she says.

Her father went into the mines and her mother circumvented Broken Hill's ban on married women working by becoming a caretaker and cleaning houses at night.

Frances excelled at school, loving maths 'because there were more boys in the class'. Not knowing what to do at the end of high school, she took up a teaching fellowship to university but dropped out after three months as she didn't find it stimulating. She managed to secure a job as a junior technician at CSIRO, a post which paid \$25 a week. Out of her salary she paid \$15 in rent and \$1 in super. By the age of 20, she was a mother with a not very supportive partner and, soon after, found herself raising her son alone.

'As I wasn't earning enough, I decided I had to get educated. I went to Sydney TAFE and did a biology technicians' certificate and then studied part-time for a Bachelor of Arts at Macquarie University, majoring in maths and physics. Thanks to the Whitlam Government, it was free.

'If I'd had to have paid fees, I would never have done it. As it was, I felt so working class and was shocked that some of the middle class women I studied with at uni didn't take it seriously. They would miss classes because of tennis or a concert!' she said.

'My parents had retired and moved to Sydney to help support me and my son but I had to pretend I was working at night, not studying. I got my PhD the year my son finished high school and my parents were disappointed to find I wasn't able to practice medicine. The biggest thrill for them is that I now teach teachers. My dad's also impressed by my salary!'

Frances spent two years as a post-doctoral fellow at the National Institute of Health in Washington.

'It was a wonderful experience and I became very restless at the CSIRO on my return. I saw a job as a senior lecturer/reader in solid state Nuclear Magnetic Resonance at the University of Melbourne and applied, even though I didn't know what a reader was. I managed to get the job without having ever studied chemistry at university level. It was a controversial decision and the head of department really had to stick his head out. Initially, there was some resentment from my colleagues but that's all changed now.'

Despite a life working in a predominantly male field, Frances has experienced relatively little direct prejudice.

'Once I asked a colleague for advice on a lab class proposal. He called a meeting and a group of men sat around a table criticising me for a spelling mistake, a mistake in refer-

encing and the length of the proposal. They made it clear that they didn't accept me as an equal and were going to put me in my place. I went to my room and cried my heart out,' she said.

These days in her department there are slightly more women students than men enrolled in chemistry with women accounting for around 20% of the teaching and research staff. More female chemists are going into industry than academia, Frances has observed.

The battle for equity is far from over, however.

'What gets me is the ways the media treats women. It represents us as airheads. Young women think this is the way to be – they don't think that being smart is something of which to be proud,' Frances says.

'Education gives you the potential to do a job you love doing. Generally it takes a young woman a long time to learn to value herself. To be paid to do something you love is wonderful. I feel so lucky.'

Frances has organised over 35 major scientific conferences and published 165 refereed papers in international journals. She was awarded the Robertson Medal by the Australian Society of Biophysics in 2009, the ANZMAG Medal in 2011 and elected Fellow of the Biophysical Society (USA) this year. **A**

Carmel Shute, Media Officer

'What gets me is the ways the media treats women. It represents us as airheads. Young women think this is the way to be – they don't think that being smart is something of which to be proud.'

