

Member focus

Prof Frances Separovic knows a thing or two about firsts

As the child of immigrants who settled in Broken Hill when she was just three-and-a-half, the long-time NTEU member went on to become the first in her family to complete primary school and eventually went on to a PhD.

Despite initially ceasing those tertiary studies after feeling overwhelmed by life in big city Sydney, Frances went on to take a job as a junior technician in the microbiology lab at the CSIRO.

Following the birth of her first child she returned to her studies while also working full time. This eventually resulted in a number of other firsts, including Frances becoming the first woman professor of Chemistry in Victoria, the first woman to be appointed Head of School of Chemistry at the University of Melbourne, and first woman chemist admitted to the Australian Academy of Science.

On International Women's Day this year, Frances marked another achievement when she was inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women.

Speaking to Advocate, Frances offered some reflections on her achievements, as well as the changes which have occurred for women in science over the course of her career.

"There have been changes for women in STEMM, and I think the big one now is that there is a lot more talk about discrimination and unconscious bias whereas previously there wasn't an open discussion about it," said Frances.

"It's healthy that people are talking about it and are conscious of it which is a really good change."

Frances said she was hopeful of using her growing and evolving list of achievements and commitments to continue promoting careers in science for women.



"I had my first career when I was at CSIRO where I worked full time, studied part time and was a single mum, and now I have my career as an academic at the University of Melbourne. Then the Honour Roll people asked me if I would act as an ambassador for women in science and I said 'sure'. I'm calling it my third career," said Frances.

"I think a big part of it is showing people how rewarding it can be doing something that you love, having a career where you can't wait to wake up every morning. Sure there are bad days, but that's what makes the good days so good."

Given her achievements, it was perhaps inevitable that Frances has come to be regarded as a role model. She said it was a concept she was still coming to terms with, but also approaching in her own way.

"I didn't really think that I was a role model, but I'll just give you one experience," said Frances.

"I was speaking at a breakfast just after I had just been made Head of School of Chemistry at the University of Melbourne.

"I told the women as I started that I didn't sleep the previous night and that I always get nervous before a talk. I said it in passing and I forgot about it.


"Then a few years later a guy told me that I was the main reason his wife stayed in science and it was because I had confessed about being nervous. We know how stressful giving talks can be, but we all pretend it's fantastic and the most nor-

mal thing. The reality is, I dread it. So that made her feel better: the sense that she's not an exception. So perhaps it's good to be a different sort of role model.

"They keep telling us as women to behave a certain way instead of saying it's OK to be you. It's about being brave even when you are not confident."

In regard to the benefits of education, Frances said she was not averse to getting 'a little bit political' particularly when it came to fair access, particularly for disadvantaged students. After all, it was free tertiary education introduced by the Whitlam Government which helped Frances on her way to so many firsts.

"Everyone sort of goes with 'first in family to go to uni', but I was the first one to finish primary school. My dad went to first grade and my mum went to second grade, so I was actually the first to go to third grade. Then it was on to secondary school and university," said Frances.

"It was a real eye opener to see how much your life is enriched by being educated. Education is a wonderful thing, allowing you to get jobs and everything else that comes with it but, aside from that, it is just an intrinsically wonderful thing." 

Andrew MacDonald, Media & Communications Officer