DANDRITE Alumni Feature

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What was most memorable to you about your experiences in your PhD and postdoctoral program, and what was most memorable to you about your experiences at DANDRITE and Aarhus University?

I was enrolled as a student at Aarhus University from 2009 to 2018 during which I obtained my bachelor, master, and PhD degree in molecular medicine. My PhD focused on Parkinson's disease and cell signaling using cell culture models. A year before finishing my PhD I started looking for a post-doctoral position abroad. I met a professor from Canada at a conference in Vienna and I was intrigued by her research. I joined her group 3 months after defending my PhD – in Toronto, Canada. Now, my research focuses on delivery of Gene Therapy to the central nervous system in preclinical animal models.

Looking back at my time as a bachelor and master student at Aarhus University, I really enjoyed that period of my academic career. The structure of the campus creates a feeling of a little town within the city, with a focus on learning and innovation. It has always fascinated me that no matter the time or day, there's always someone present at Aarhus University, either conducting an experiment or deeply concentrated in studying for an exam (or just in early for "Kapsejladsen"). To me, this symbolized a passion for research and learning, and it was a very inspiring environment to study and grow in. What I find unique about DANDRITE, in particular, is the opportunity to gain knowledge on a great variety of neuroscientific areas. DANDRITE gave me the opportunity to connect with other neuroscientists outside of biomedicine which really broadened my idea of neuroscience in general. For example, our biweekly internal meetings created a strong foundation for collaborations as well as a relaxed atmosphere for students to present their work and to interact with other researchers at all levels. The DANDRITE community provided me with a great sense of belonging, and after having left DANDRITE, I have really come to appreciate how unique this was.

How have you used your skills and experiences gained at DANDRITE and Aarhus University in your subsequent positions?

Looking back at my PhD program, I grew dramatically from a newly enrolled PhD student to a much more independent researcher. What I especially remember from my training is how I learned to always ask questions along the way during an experiment and never assume that anything in science is set in stone. DANDRITE and Aarhus University also provided several opportunities for me to present my work and to teach other students e.g. by participating in the Nordic EMBL Partnership conferences, internal meetings, and the mandatory teaching tasks as a PhD student. These experiences allowed me to develop my communication skills – a skill which I am highly dependent upon in my current and future positions e.g. when supervising students in the laboratory or presenting my work at conferences.
At first, obtaining a PhD degree might seem like many years of education, but the time as a PhD student is exciting and you will do research from day one. Doing a PhD is also not incompatible with having a life outside of the laboratory and I strongly believe that having other interests makes a better scientist. In a research environment like DANDRITE, you will also experience a great community among the PhD students, both in and outside of the laboratories.

What advice would you give to someone who is considering pursuing a doctorate within science?

It has been a highly valuable experience for me to go from an in vitro based PhD to a postdoc focusing on treatments and preclinical models, and I will strongly recommend others to also dare change their research area. Even though I initially had to learn a lot of new things, I believe that the mixture of my PhD background and current postdoctoral training is exactly what will enable me to create a unique profile for myself as a future scientist.
A career in academia is exciting and, I believe, should be driven by a passion for knowledge and data. As soon as you come to terms with the fact that research success will go up and down, science will always be fascinating. As a scientist you get to spend your time developing new knowledge and you can work almost anywhere in the world. Living in a different culture has made me grow quicker than I thought possible, both in regards to my career and my personal life. It has been a life-changing experience and I will highly recommend it to others.