

Sweet success

Scientific approach to life leads alum to success with Nestlé

By Tracy S. Petersen

Elaine Wedral looks at science as a way of life. The 1966 graduate of Purdue University's School of Agriculture is president and chairman of Westreco, Incorporated, the North American research and development arm of Nestlé S.A. She is also a woman who knows the benefits of the scientific approach to solving problems.

"Scientists are puzzle solvers," says Wedral. "They use sophisticated tools, but the whole approach is similar to the trial and observation approach a child uses. It also adds, of course, a mature and rational selection of options."

It's that logical, focused approach that has guided Wedral's career.

At a time when most women were discouraged from pursuing careers in science, Wedral was earning her bachelor's degree in biochemistry from Purdue in 1966; her master's degree in microbiology from Cornell University in 1968; and her doctorate in food chemistry from Cornell in 1970.

Today Wedral is president and chairman of Nestlé's entire research and development program in the United States. Under her leadership, and with the 600 scientists and technicians reporting to her, Westreco has contributed significantly to the business goals of Nestlé U.S.A., one of the leading new product food companies.

Nestlé is the largest food company in the world. Based in Switzerland, its U.S. brand names include Contadina, Libby, Carnation, Beringer Wines and Friskies Pet Food.

Wedral began her career as a chemist with the Campbell Soup Company. She also has held positions as senior scientist in product and nutritional services, director of product development and vice president of research and development with Libby, McNeil & Libby.

Following the merger of Libby and Nestlé S.A., Wedral was promoted to vice president/director of research and development for Westreco, Inc., Nestlé's Western Hemisphere Research Company.

Wedral was named president of Nestlé's California development laboratory, formerly Carnation, in 1987, and was named to her current position in 1990. She serves on the Research and Development Steering Committee for Nestec, the technical research subsidiary of Nestlé S.A., which plans research and development strategy worldwide for Nestlé.

A native of the Detroit area, Wedral first came to Purdue as a high school student. She spent a summer on the West Lafayette, Ind., campus participating in the advanced science program funded by the National Science Foundation.

"It was fantastic," says Wedral,



Elaine Wedral was named a Distinguished Agricultural Alumnus by the School of Agriculture in 1992. Food Science department head Phil Nelson was one of Wedral's professors when she was a student at Purdue.

whose counselor for the summer was former dean of agriculture, Earl Butz, BS '32, PhD '37. "The people were wonderful; the professors were technically outstanding and thought provoking. I couldn't imagine going anywhere else."

As an undergraduate, Wedral worked in the lab of Bernard Liska, who later went on to serve as dean of agriculture. While she originally thought of taking her interest in chemistry to pharmaceuticals, in Liska's lab she learned that basic chemistry can be naturally applied to food.

Bill Stadelman, professor emeritus of animal sciences, encouraged Wedral to write scientific papers, something unusual for an undergrad.

"She was one of the top students at Purdue at the time," says Phil Nelson, BS '56, PhD '67, now head of Purdue's Department of Food Science. "She always stretched herself. She took more challenging courses than were required."

The results of an aptitude test at Purdue that indicated Wedral was suited for a career in industry set her current career path.

"I thought that was crazy," she says. "I wanted to do basic research and teach. If it were not for that test, I may never

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have considered industry. But going into industry has provided a very technically exciting career, and science education is still an important part of my life." Wedral is affiliated with the National Alliances for Science, the National Council for Science Education, and is on the National Academy of Science

Advisory Board on Science and Math Education.

"I believe strongly that educators in the United States do not emphasize science and math as much as they did when I was in school," says Wedral.

She tracks one measure of the success of U.S. science education by watching the number of patents granted U.S. scientists as compared to those of other nations over the course of time. "The trend is frightening," she says.

With support, Wedral notes, today's teachers can make a major difference.

"I believe there are some excellent changes in the works," she says. "Teachers are increasingly emphasizing hands-on approaches to science. Youth responds to this, and science is natural to them. I personally know it works, and all of us in industry have a responsibility to pitch in and help."