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Life Lessons

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It’s been almost 10 years since I earned my Ph.D. in Auditory Neuroscience from the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders at Northwestern University. Four homes, two children, and three companies later, for this special edition, I reflected on the lessons I learned from my advisor, Dr. Nina Kraus. Not just those on how to run an electroencephalography experiment, how to analyze vector data in Matlab or the anatomy of the auditory system, but the life lessons I’ve taken to heart and integrated into my professional and personal life these last 10 years.

Take a Chance



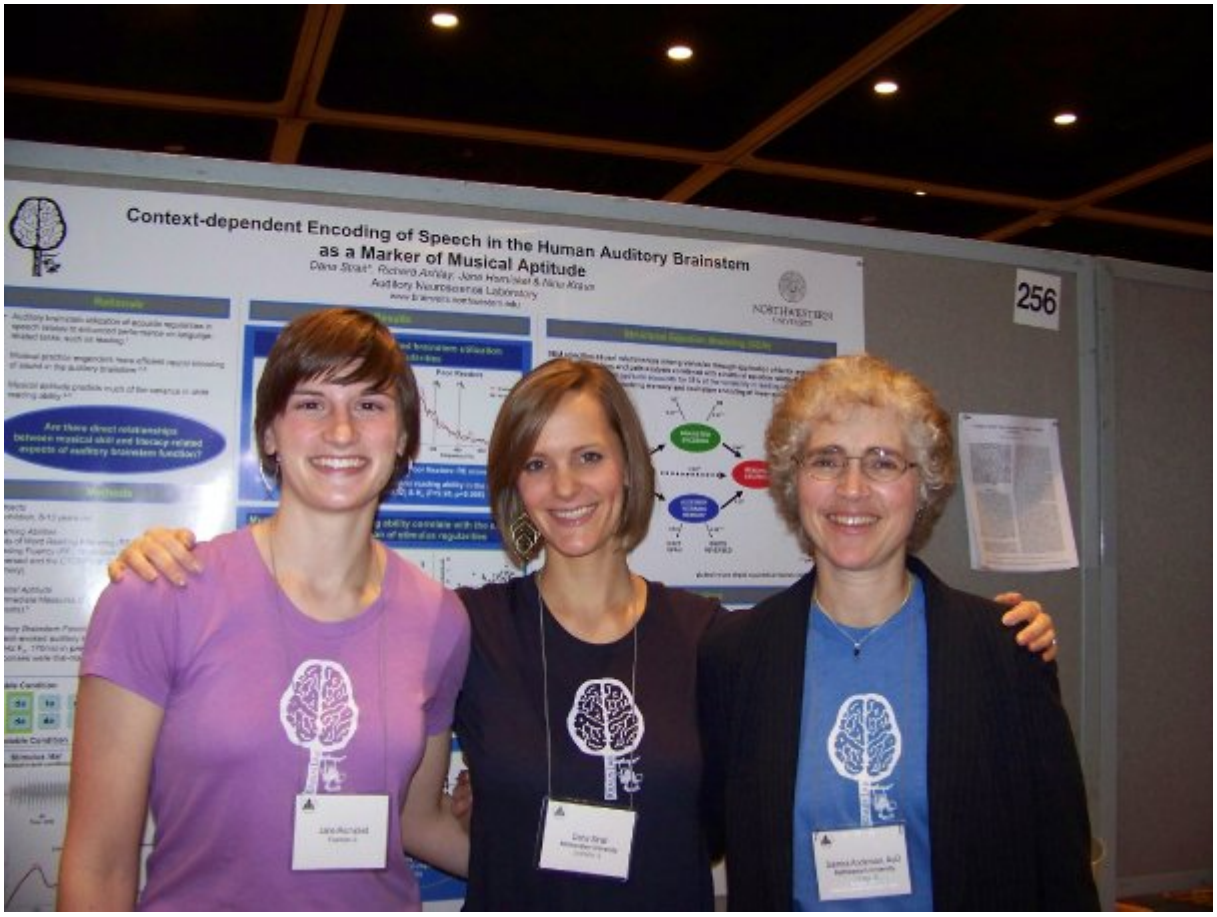
When I applied to graduate school, I was finishing my undergraduate degree in Neuroscience from Colgate University. Like other twenty-two year old’s, I didn’t necessarily know what I wanted to do as a career and was considering Teach for America and other education-based options besides graduate school. When applying to Northwestern University, I quickly identified Nina’s research as an exciting opportunity for me, and, apparently, she did too! I learned later that she advocated

for me with the admissions committee, encouraging them to take a chance on my potential. She helped craft that potential into collaborations on 23 publications and 19 conference presentations, supported by the sizeable school-aged population study running at the time (Listening, Learning and the Brain). The experience she provided me in running a large-scale study was critical for developing project management, people management, and presentation skills. It's these soft skills that have been vital to my professional accomplishments since.

While her initial advocacy led the way to my opportunities in graduate school, she later advocated for me in a way that pivoted my whole career to its present direction. During my post-doctoral fellowship, I decided to start my own research company to support educators and learning clinics with research analysis and writing. Nina not only encouraged me to take that entrepreneurial step but was also my first client! Without her encouragement, I would not have started exploring educational research and technology as a career option. In addition to my small business, I also became the Director of Research at Hyde Park Day School. I then started my career at Schoolzilla (by Renaissance), where I have led customer support, customer setup. Customer account management as the Associate Director of Customer Success, using many of the skills Nina taught me.

Slides Should Have As Few Words As Possible

In my career so far, I've had many opportunities to teach: graduate student courses, lectures for parents of students participating in my studies, onboarding school district staff learning to use Schoolzilla – a critical skill I learned while in Nina's lab. Nina made sure that any student presenting at a conference or department lecture practiced their presentation at our weekly lab meetings. One semester as two students were preparing for their thesis defenses, I had to leave a lab meeting to take an exam, and she and the group were still helping prepare the students when I returned! Nina always emphasized that slides and presentations should be engaging, encouraging us to use few to no words on our slides, include audio and video clips, and not get stuck behind a podium while speaking. She was the only speaker to request a clip-on microphone at more than one conference and was famous for her laser pointer/slide advancer.



Given the exciting research we conducted in the lab, Nina received many invitations to speak worldwide. She recognized these invitations as opportunities for her students to create international collaborations. Through her generosity, I was able to speak at conferences across the US and in Germany, Hong Kong, and Egypt. I would never have traveled to those countries or learned from their cultures without the opportunity Nina provided. Those trips not only strengthened my communication skills but also my understanding of the world.

Be a Leader

Since I started my career in the educational technology industry, I realized how lucky I was to have a strong role model in Nina of who a professional woman could be and what she could accomplish. Seeing a woman like me be a respected, well-known world expert gave me a model of who I could become. Although I did not choose to follow her footsteps in academia, that confidence has carried me through my small business venture and entering a technology field, now taking on a new role as a technical product owner. Nina never takes no for an answer, always determined to support her research and her students in any way she can.

Cherish Your Family



Many of my favorite memories of my time in Nina’s lab were dinners at her house. She would invite the entire lab over, cook her favorite Italian dishes, and end the evening with music. Nina created a family among students, staff, and post-docs through her caring and support and demonstrated the importance of family through her relationships with her husband and sons. It is abundantly clear they are the joys of her life. When I brought my then-boyfriend (now husband) to his first lab dinner, it was like I was bringing him home to meet my family. And in early 2020, at a lab reunion dinner, I was thrilled to have the opportunity to introduce her to my oldest daughter (also named Nina).

Through Nina’s example, I learned that a woman can be an academic intellectual, a model communicator, a mother, and an adventurer, seizing the opportunities life presents. I am thrilled to contribute to this special issue honoring Nina by sharing some of the ways she has and continues to inspire me.