

A *lasting* memorial

Two sisters honor their mother's memory through support of Whitehead Institute

by Maureen Murray

Jenifer and Samantha Schweitzer have a long-standing fascination with science. And yet, the sisters—only in their thirties and with strong liberal arts backgrounds and graduate degrees in law and architecture/design—may not seem the most likely supporters of Whitehead Institute. It was an unexpected trail that led them to the Institute and their desire to learn more about science.

In 1985, the sisters' mother, Sandra Meyer Schweitzer, was diagnosed with breast cancer. In coping with her cancer, their mother relied on her intellect and drive by studying the science behind her illness. Her oncologist shared detailed information about her treatments and put her in clinical trials. Jenifer says, "Her way of coping was to really understand what was happening in her body. She couldn't stand any support group talk. That just wasn't her spirit in dealing with cancer."

During their mother's final hospitalization, the sisters discussed with their aunt—famous playwright Wendy Wasserstein—their desire to memorialize their mother's life in some way. With help from the Wasserstein family, they decided to launch a foundation in her honor and quickly raised \$135,000. They first thought of donating the funds to a business school; their mother was a great advocate of women in business and enjoyed her role mentoring young businesswomen. A scholarship in her name seemed logical. As Samantha recounts, however, the business schools they visited practically turned them away. "We were told," Samantha says, "that \$135,000 wouldn't even cover their paper supplies."

Then their accountant, Whitehead Board of Associates member Jeff Schulman, suggested they visit Whitehead Institute. In late fall 1999, Schulman arranged for Jenifer to meet with Whitehead Founding Member Robert Weinberg. Jenifer says, "After meeting with Bob Weinberg for one hour, I called Sam and said, 'I should have been a scientist or a doctor.' But Sam's the one who really should have been a scientist." The Schweitzers were also impressed by the women researchers they came to meet in the Weinberg lab. "Understanding the science helped our mother cope with the illness," Samantha says. "Whitehead helped us come to the realization that contributing to basic scientific research would be the best legacy we could leave for our mother."

"We were impressed of course with the science," Jenifer remembers, "but also the collegial atmosphere. We met women scientists in Bob's lab who my mother would have loved to have met." The pair later met with Susan Whitehead, vice chairperson of the Institute's Board of Directors and daughter of founder Jack Whitehead. "Within a few months, we donated all the foundation money to Whitehead. We didn't realize it at the time—though Susan Whitehead kept telling us that we would—but we stayed connected. We joined the BOA the following year and loved it. The Whitehead scientists used analogies that people like us could understand."



Sandra Meyer Schweitzer

TAPPING YOUNG PROFESSIONALS

In the beginning, the sister's main involvement was attending the annual BOA meeting. "We were wowed by the science," says Samantha, 31. "But as we looked around the room, Jenifer and I realized we were among the only people under 40."

So, the sisters came up with the idea to create a group targeted at younger audiences interested in science and Whitehead. The Schweitzers nominated five friends to the BOA and the troupe helped form the core of the Young Professionals Group, which held its first meeting in September 2003.

At that first gathering, more than 50 young professionals met at the Union Club in New York. David Sabatini, Whitehead's newest—and youngest—Member spoke about "how biology regulates the sizes of things." Sabatini studies among other things, how the systems that regulate the sizes of cells ultimately regulate the sizes of organisms. The Young Professionals were very enthusiastic, Sabatini says, and surprised him by "getting right to the crux of the biological issues" during the question-and-answer period. The Schweitzers and other organizers considered the event a great success that stirred interest in the Institute.

A POWERFUL CONNECTION

From memorializing with a foundation to how they live their day-to-day lives, the Schweitzers maintain a strong connection to their mother and each other. As Samantha describes where she lives in New York, she says, "I live in Manhattan, 20 blocks from Jenifer." Then Jenifer, 34, elaborates, "We stay connected—pretty much all day."

Samantha runs her own business as a landscape architect and graphic designer. Recently Jenifer gave birth to a baby boy, Alexander Edward Brooks, whom she named after her mother. (Sandra is the female diminutive form of Alexander.) She also works as the communications director for a non-profit organization that specializes in educating the public about emergency preparedness.

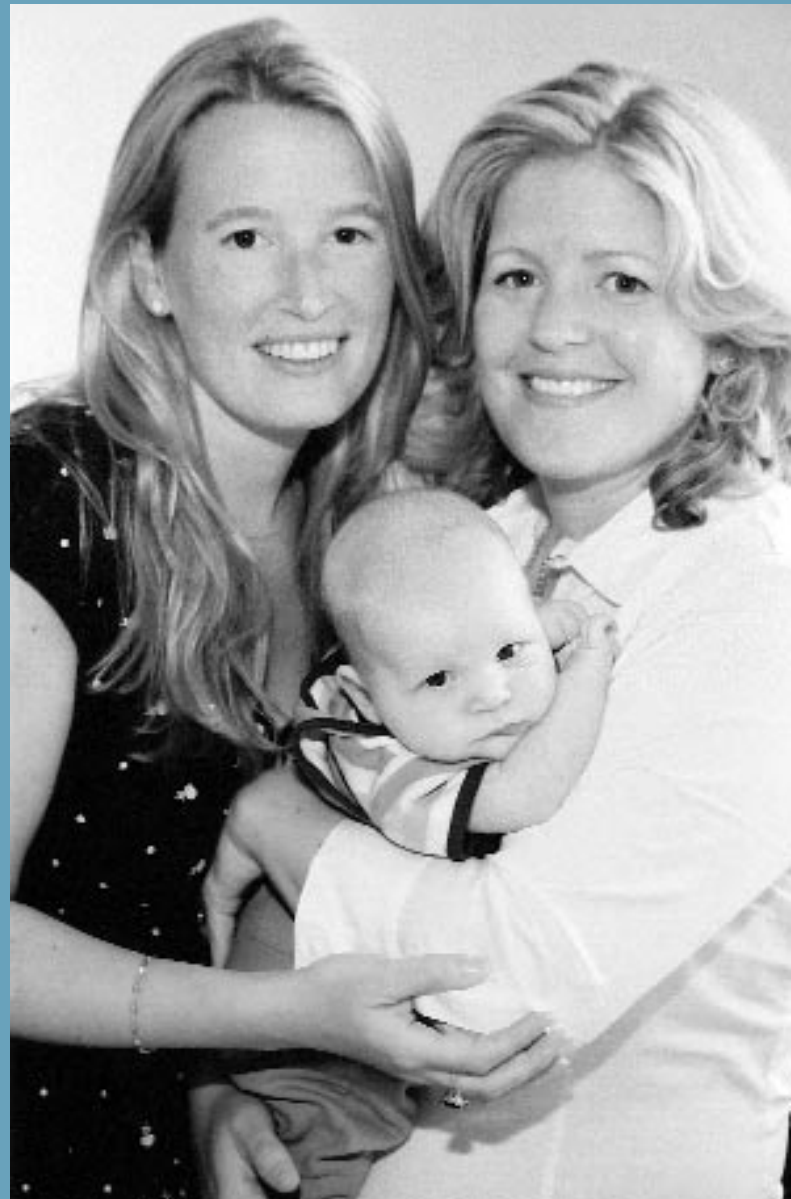
"My mother worked as a Vice President for General Foods when I was born, which was very unusual for women at the time," Jenifer explains. "The part I think about, more now that I have an infant, is that she was forced to take maternity leave and not guaranteed a job when she returned. She went back to work when I was three weeks old. I can't imagine that. She had an extensive suit of armor."

The sisters paint a picture of their mother as fierce in spirit—both in the business world and in her approach to her illness. Remembering her by supporting an Institute founded to foster groundbreaking research and the spirited scientists that do that work seems a natural fit.

Samantha remembers at one of her first BOA meetings walking around with Jenifer—they were both carrying test tubes of their own DNA. "We were so excited," she says. "Now, among our friends, we all joke that Whitehead will save the world."

For more information on the Board of Associates and the Young Professionals Group, contact the Institutional Advancement Office at 617.452.3563.

Samantha and Jenifer with Jenifer's newborn Alexander.



WENDY MOGER-BROSS