

June 24, 2020

Welcome to WoW, the Woman of the Week podcast series from PharmaVOICE. This episode was made possible by a generous sponsorship from IQVIA. For more information, visit IQVIA.com.

In this episode, Taren Grom, Editor-in-Chief of PharmaVOICE magazine, meets with Shobha Parthasarathi, PhD, VP External Innovation & New Ventures, Xontogeny.

Taren: Shobha, welcome to the PharmaVOICE WoW podcast program.

Shobha: Thank you, Taren. I really appreciate you having me here. And it's a pleasure to speak with you today.

Taren: It's our pleasure to have you, so let's get started. I'm so intrigued by your background and the path that led you to your current position. Can you tell us a little bit about your journey?

Shobha: Sure. So let's see. Well, I grew up in India, and I finished my graduate school there, a Masters in medical microbiology. I came to the US to do my PhD over 30 years ago. And then after I finished my PhD, which was again in molecular genetics and microbiology, I chose to be in industry. And that was against the norm. Most people expected that after you finished your PhD, you'll go in for an academic postdoc, and instead, I chose to go to industry.

I started my research career at Millennium Pharmaceuticals in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I got my first taste of drug discovery there, and also experienced the whole biotech phenomenon. The company grew there, from about 200 people to well over 3,000 people by the time I left, so it was really a wonderful experience.

After Millennium, I moved. My next career was in North Carolina, in the Research Triangle Park, where I shifted gears a little bit and moved into business development and investing in early stage startup companies.

I've been sort of in that ecosystem ever since. It's been absolutely a joy to be in that space, conducting diligence, working closely with the entrepreneurs and academic founders, making decisions on funding, connecting with the other investor community, as well as the pharmaceutical industry. I've loved all aspects of it, the human connections to just the process of investing and the impact that we have on these nascent companies.

But then, if you are sort of open minded and willing to embrace change, life can get very interesting. About six years ago, I got recruited to Cleveland, Ohio, to join Harrington Discovery Institute. It's an international initiative that helps to translate scientific discoveries into

medicines to benefit society. And through funding and drug development expertise, it helps to sort of bridge that critical gap that exists in early drug development.

I served as their Vice President for Strategic Alliances and Business Development. And during that period, along with the traditional sources of funding, I also got exposed to alternative sources, and in particular got exposed to the world of venture philanthropy.

At that time, I also kind of became a road warrior in my career. I spent about five years working in a different state away from my family. I would see them only on the weekends. And I would take out the first flight out on Monday mornings and come back late at night on Fridays.

I think I worked through the job in Cleveland while my family lived in North Carolina, Dallas, Texas, and Boston, so you learn a lot about yourself by being flexible, etc. I spent way too many hours on planes and in hotels but absolutely enjoyed my role in the Harrington Discovery Institute's mission and helping grow that initiative.

Now I may have stayed on with Harrington, but then Xontogeny came along and offered me an opportunity that I couldn't refuse. It also gave me a path to reconnect with my family. And so here I am, based in Boston. I've been with the firm for just about a year now.

And Xontogeny is an interesting organization or a company. It's an accelerator that has access to a venture fund, so we make seed investments in life science companies and also series investments across therapeutics, diagnostics, and medical devices in pretty much all of disease indications as well as modalities.

So it's been an exciting area for me, and I've been able to continue the work in terms of living that startup life vicariously through the others that I interact with.

Taren: Well, that's a wild ride. I mean, you talk about being so versatile and so being flexible. And so are you all together now with your family in Boston?

Shobha: I live in Lexington. And yes, I think my daughter who's in high school is glad to have me there. She was kind of getting tired of dad's cooking.

Taren: I bet. But at the same time, you're doing such interesting work, and so I just want to go back just a minute when you said that you made the decision to go into industry rather than academia. What was that lever like for you? Why make that decision?

Shobha: Well, I think you have to pay attention to who you are, and what makes you tick. And I sort of always knew that my personality was much more suited for industry. I was and am still a pretty good teacher. I can be a great mentor, but I couldn't see myself writing grants and surviving on that. I'm a very much a people person, I need to be out there doing things. So I think I paid attention to my personality and where I would thrive, and it was industry.

Taren: That's awesome. And I think that's a really great tip for anybody who's looking to figure out what their career path is, is to not take into account those personality traits because it's tough. Either way you go, so academia is not suited for a lot of people, but neither is industry. So you made the right choice for you, which is really insightful.

Shobha: It worked out.

Taren: I think it worked out pretty well for you. Yes. So let's talk about what's happening in the accelerator space, in the seed funding space. So what excites you about the current climate in terms of science and drug discovery today?

Shobha: You use the word climate. Well, I'll tell you, it's hot.

Taren: That's awesome.

Shobha: Not just the climate change part of it, no, but the entire landscape for drug discovery. I mean, if you kind of break down the business that we're in sort of into three buckets, the traditional way that we develop products, a middle ground where there's transition ongoing, and looking at the other end with a new lens, rethinking and sort of overhauling our existing processes, we are at a very sort of exciting time.

I mean, I see change everywhere in every aspect of this industry, starting from the sources of funding to the amount of funding, the types of entrepreneurs we're seeing, the timeline to clinical trials, the regulatory approval process, extracting value, using AI or focusing more on mechanism of action, as opposed to symptomatic treatment, precision medicine of the cell and gene therapy, targeted therapies and delivery, the interest in rare diseases.

I mean, none of these are mature fields by any means, but we've come a long way, even from where we were 20 years ago. And so to me, that's why I say it's hot, it's on fire, we are in the midst of major changes, and it's all very encouraging to me.

Taren: And do you think that this change is going to be even further accelerated by the current COVID-19 situation, where companies are really, really starting to rethink their processes?

Shobha: Absolutely, yes. I mean, you see it in how quickly companies have been able to pivot, and I think you need an impetus and you need a stimulus to kind of make you force you to think differently. And I think that's what's happened here is, we've all been forced to rethink the way we do business. And so I'm hoping that the lessons that we learn from this period in time will actually then make us much more efficient and more productive over time.

Taren: I agree. I'd hate to think that we go back to whatever was normal before and instead, take these lessons and really create systemic change for the future. That's my hope.

I love all those areas that you talked about and some of them, obviously, as you said, maybe 20 years, but they're not mature. Like the next five to 10 years, where do you see the biggest opportunity for innovation? And then how do you define innovation because everybody looks at it differently?

Shobha: So on a personal front for me, innovation is sort of the catalyst for meaningful change that helps to keep things relevant. But at its core, it's developing new ideas, products, services. Sometimes, in some cases, it's incremental innovation. And then other times, it's breakthrough and disruptive and game changing, whatever you want to call that.

Majority of these tend to be somewhere in the middle. Necessity, they say, is the mother of invention, but I think when it comes to innovation, it's often much more deliberate and purposeful, to make things efficient and to make them more effective. So, as far as your question on, whereas the things happening in the next few years, I think this is definitely the time for selling gene therapy to kind of show what they can do.

There's a lot of activity in that space, so I will definitely say in the next few years, you're going to see a lot more than that, because it also leads towards this whole precision medicine. We're understanding the immune system a lot better than we used to, still nowhere near where we have all the answers, but all of that is leading towards more cell and gene therapies kind of taking center stage.

Taren: So let's go to when you start to look and evaluate some of those technologies and innovations. What are some of the factors you think about when you're deciding to advance a new therapeutic forward, or what kind of companies you want to invest in?

Shobha: From a practical standpoint, there are a host of factors, but it's really a checklist that we take into consideration when making a decision to advance a therapeutic. And in that, we are no different from any typical investor. However, we are invariably the first professional money and in a way, the risk of failure is pretty high.

We look at all the standard things. What's the unmet medical need? Is there a market for it? Can it be a platform for other diseases? How many drugs are already in that space to serve that population? Where's the novelty and why should anybody care? Is there any life left in the intellectual property? Is it a clean intellectual property? Or what's the history? Is there a prior art, and how much time and money it's going to take us to get to clinical trials? And finally, does this even fit our brand?

All of these factors come into play for making a decision on whether we want to take something forward. We make investments in technologies as much as we do in the people, because we are in it for the long haul. And we want it to be a win-win for all, so we pay attention to relationships, trust, rapport, all of those things become important because bad decisions made early on then come to bite us later on when it's much, much more expensive and much, much harder to fix. So yeah, it's a combination of things that we look at.

Taren: The way you explain it, it sounds it's a little cut and dry, but I got to believe there's some instinct involved there. So when does that kick in? Like, do you ever hear a pitch or you go in and you hear from a company that wants you to take a look at them and you just get that feeling that, yes, this could be the next thing?

Shobha: Of course. I mean, it doesn't have to be the next thing. Sometimes we talk about just simplistic elegance. You look at the data and you just go, wow, and then you meet the people and you connect and you know it's going to be good.

I mean, that's also the time when things can fall apart. You can have a really nice data piece, the science is great, compelling, but then if you don't connect with the people, it falls through. So I think it's a combination of at that early stage, you don't have a whole lot of things to go by, except the science and the people.

Taren: I love that. So what are some of the most exciting ventures that you've backed in your career and/or been a part of, and why?

Shobha: I have backed many startups over the years in therapeutics, diagnostics, medical devices. I get very excited when I see a company that I backed a long time ago when it was a nothing to when they get to clinical trials or they go public, or they get acquired by a pharma company, and most importantly, they get a product to deliver to a patient. I get excited by all of those events.

But, personally, I feel really good about where gene therapy has come and the reason being I worked on viral vectors in grad school and as a postdoc, the field was not at that time where it is today. I have backed some gene therapy companies over the years and they have done well. It's been satisfying for me to see the outcome there. There are at least, I would say, about 7 to 10 companies that have done really well, have products and have gone public, have had successful exits, so I'm excited about all of those.

Taren: That's awesome. I love that feeling that I hear from you that this is really a personal business for you and that you really connect with those companies and with those products. You're all about getting the sense you're about the greater good, which is fabulous.

Shobha: I firmly believe in doing well by doing good.

Taren: I love that, doing well by doing good. That's awesome. So let's talk about you being in a unique position as a woman in a position that you're in. There just aren't that many women who are involved in that VC space. Do you think there are some unique challenges and pressures for women who are trying to break into this area?

Shobha: Yeah. There are a lot of articles actually written on that subject. But I'll answer for you to sort of in two ways (A) as to why there are fewer women in that space and maybe address

some specific challenges. I mean, we as women, I think we like to be qualified in any role that we take on. We want to come in there with the credentials. Now we do see a lot of women in law and accounting and all those fields and far fewer in the VC world.

And that's because there are degrees, you can go and do a law degree and you can do an accounting degree. There's nothing of that sort to become a VC. So nobody knows how to break into it. And the awareness is just not there, unless you're already in it or you're somehow associated with it. So that's part of it.

And then secondly, it's the question of network. Women just don't have that network. In my case, because of the nature of the jobs that I took on over the years, that has resulted in a network that's immensely meaningful to me. But typically we don't have that network.

And so much of life comes down to human connections, and that's an important part of being in this investing world. You have to be able to invest with people that you have shared vision with, and that's what happens in terms of challenges for us. There is reduced awareness on both sides and VCs, they invest in technology, and then like I said, they also invest in the people. And right now, maybe VCs are more investing in people that they are familiar with, people that they connect with, and just we haven't reached that point for them to get that level of comfort with us. So it's work that has to be done on both sides to improve awareness. And for that, I think what we have to do is start choosing the right mentors and the right VCs, do our research so that we choose what's the right fit for us, both from working as a VC in a VC group, as well as seeking investment VCs.

Taren: Shobha, you talked just a minute ago about that network, and I know that you're involved with the Women in Bio organization. How has that organization helped you either build or nurture your network?

Shobha: Good question. While I was doing all this on the professional side, I did kind of pick up a few extracurricular activities along the way. So I initially started out as a member of Women in Bio when I was in North Carolina in the Research Triangle Park.

And seeing that it has a huge unmet need, not just drugs, but also in this space, I eventually over time became the chair for Women in Bio for the Research Triangle Park chapter. I've been involved with the organization for over a decade. And it's just something that I am passionate about, because there's a huge need, and women are looking for answers and they don't know where to go.

And it's at all levels. I mean, I work with graduate students, I work with postdocs, I work with entry-level, middle-level management, and of course, executive women. And there's a lot that we can do to help these women balance their work and home life together. And so I've been actively involved in that. It's been very rewarding for me.

Now that I'm in Boston, I continue to mentor and I'm still with Women in Bio, but I mentor for Babson College's Center for Women's Entrepreneurship and Leadership program. I'm also a mentor for this very exciting new program called Equalize 2020 which is a symposium and pitch competition that's designed to sort of take national action around the disparity of women academic inventors who are forming university startups.

It's been a joy having these extracurricular activities on the side. I also sit on some advisory boards for several organizations, but it's all in the same space and it's all in the same industry and it's just different components of the space.

Taren: If some of the folks in our audience who are listening just wanted to find more about that Equalize 2020, where can they go?

Shobha: Just type in Equalize 2020, it'll show up. It's a partnership between Washington University, Missouri and Osage University Partners.

Taren: Thank you for that.

Shobha: I think the event is actually next week. The event is on the 25th. I think about a dozen women are pitching.

Taren: Fantastic. That's great to know. Thank you so much. You talked about advisory boards. That's another area where I often hear women, how do you get onto an advisory board? How do you get onto a corporate board? Any advice for our audience?

Shobha: So I haven't been on a corporate board yet. I emphasize *yet*. But I've been on many advisory boards. I think it begins with you being willing to go out there and start get your feet wet. I started out initially with not-for-profit boards. I was on various education boards and helped out on various... whatever your strength is, you try and help out in that, you learn new fields.

So, I started out with a lot of not-for-profit boards, and you kind of understand what you bring to the table and then I think you kind of build from there. Now, actually, we are in a much better position. I mean, Women in Bio has a whole program on getting to the boardroom.

You have to seek out. I mean this is not something you do alone. You have to seek out, you have to reach out, and you have to build that network and you have to really work with the community to get to those things. It just doesn't happen in a vacuum or in a silo.

Taren: Excellent. One of the questions I asked all of our WoWs is, is there anything you know now that you wish you had known as you were moving up the ranks, something you might have done differently?

Shobha: Well, I would have told myself, check in with yourself more often, take time to reflect, sort of separate the daily execution from the strategic one. Seriously, I mean, I would tell myself to slow down, stop and think, reflect. It's happened a few times in my life, but it was never my own choice. I was forced to it.

The daily chatter is sort of all consuming, and it prevents one from being strategic. And I often think I know that's why in the old days the sages and the wise men, they lived in solitude up in the Himalayas, somewhere, wherever. But you need that solitude to reflect.

Taren: I see now on top of the mountaintop. I get it. I think that's part true and that's part of the reason that women don't accelerate as fast as men sometimes too – heads are down, doing that daily grind and not taking that time to reflect.

Shobha: You have to step back.

Taren: It's an awesome point. How would you describe yourself as a leader? You've had a lot of different roles and you've had to lead a lot of teams. How would you describe your leadership style?

Shobha: What I've learned about my leadership style, honestly, is from feedback that I have received from my team and my colleagues over the years. And what I'm about to tell you are actually words that they have used to describe my leadership style, so this is not coming from me.

So they will tell you and they have told me that I'm someone who develops and empowers their team. They've told me that I drive to an outcome for impact, that I provide tools and a supportive environment that allows for growth and exploration. They've told me that I create an air of positivity, and I inspire those around. I've been called a servant leader. I've also been told I can sometimes be very annoying because things could be terrible and falling apart and I would still be smiling.

Taren: I don't know that that's terrible. To me, that sounds great.

Shobha: That's what I've learned over the years.

Taren: That's awesome. I think if you could smile through adversity, you can handle anything. I think that's a positive trait.

Shobha: I do believe that attitude impacts outcome.

Taren: And so finally, tell me about an accomplishment or a wow moment that shaped your career.

Shobha: Call me greedy, but I would not be satisfied with just one accomplishment or wow moment. For me, it's those many, many tiny, tiny wow moments that I get from all the people and companies that I bet on and I work with, and that keeps me going and makes me sort of stay focused in this ecosystem.

I know it sounds like typical investor talking, it's all about diversification, not having all my eggs in one basket. But I'll give you some examples. When an entrepreneur receives funding, because somehow I was involved in some shape or form, I rejoice. Or maybe a company that I had backed many years ago and now they bring a product to market, they go public or they get acquired; that's a wow moment for me.

When I spend time with a young person, discussing career alternatives, and I kind of see a spark in them, that's a little picker upper. And when a female entrepreneur that I mentor, if she goes and wins a pitch competition, well, that's a reason to dance in the rain for me.

So I'm big on gratitude and hard work. And I sort of feel that the rest of it takes care of itself. I try to do the right thing for others, and I pay forward and I think it has served me well. I've been very lucky with my work choices, my family and friends, and I don't take any of them for granted.

People have actually blown me away with the things that they have said, written, or done for me. I've had strong men and women as mentors. And so when I look back, I could have never predicted this path for myself. I absolutely enjoy what I do. And I look forward to kind of getting out of bed and starting my day.

So it's not just one thing for me. It's a lot of little, little things.

Taren: I love that you're dancing in the rain. I think that is just the best.

Shobha: I've done it!

Taren: It's great. Thank you so much for being part of our WoW podcast program. Thank you so much for sharing your inspirational journey, and for these great tips on really finding a way to navigate a career that has been really purposeful for yourself. So thank you, and I wish you continued great success.

Shobha: I look forward to staying in touch. And thank you so much for having me, Taren.

Taren: It's our pleasure.

Thank you for listening to this episode of WoW – the Woman of the Week podcast series. And thanks again to IQVIA for sponsoring this episode. For more information, visit IQVIA.com.

And don't forget to check out our other episodes at pharmavoice.com/wow.