

# DR. HANNAH THOMPSON CROASDALE

“Four for the woodchucks, one to grow”

**D**uring most of my undergraduate years at Dartmouth College, I knew of Dr. Hannah Thompson Croasdale only by association with the award given in her name to the—usually radical feminist—senior woman who “has done the most to improve the lives of women on campus.” I learned after graduation, through living with Hannah, that she sees her own role differently. For most of her career, Hannah remained silent about receiving unequal status and salary compared to her male colleagues.

“I never did anything to help those girls except tell them to be quiet and wait,” Hannah laughs if the subject surfaces. As I’ve come to know her, I’ve tried to piece together Hannah’s stories to understand and reconcile her silent way of life with mine.

Passing by me to sit down for lunch one day, Hannah commented that I was sitting on my ankles.

“Sorry,” I apologized. “I forget it’s bad manners!”

But Hannah complimented me and said she wished she could do the same, if only her legs were limber enough. She told me that when she was three and unable to see above the table, her grandmother tried to pull her legs out from under her at dinner.

“Why?” Hannah cried.

“Don’t thee want to be a little lady?” Hannah says her grandmother demanded.

“Of course not,” Hannah replied, but her grandmother made her sit “like a lady” on a pile of books, anyway.

But that grandmother’s attitudes seem to have been more the exception than the rule in Hannah’s family. Defying turn-of-the-century expectations that women should concern themselves with courting, cooking, and corset-wearing, Hannah’s parents allowed her to wear pants if she could prove she needed them for practical purposes; they encouraged her to spend time outdoors; they expected her to do carpentry and yard work around the house with her older brother; and as far as I can tell, they remained neutral on the subject of marriage.

And Hannah’s mother taught her through her own example that she could make a difference in people’s lives. A member of her Pennsylvania hometown group dubbed by outsiders as “Them Damn Women” (TDW), Hannah’s mother helped clean up the school board, subdue

the Ku Klux Klan, and fight for female suffrage.

Both of Hannah’s parents placed high expectations on her education. They sent Hannah and her brother to private high schools on the condition that they maintain good grades. Hannah retained this privilege, while her brother, who spent most of his time playing tennis, had to drop out. Hannah’s successes and joy in studying the sciences, her parents’ emotional and financial support, and the influence of her grandmother Hannah Croasdale—one of the first female doctors in the country—gave Hannah the tangible and intangible resources to continue her education at the University of Pennsylvania.

Hannah moved on with a different ethos than that of Them Damn Women; her rule of thumb seemed to be study hard and blend in with the scenery. When Hannah entered UPenn in 1924, it had just opened its doors to women. Hannah says women had to ask individual professors for permission to enroll in each course. She recalls how, when she was asking one professor for permission, he nodded his head and looked beyond her to the far reaches of the auditorium and declared “I don’t see you.”

“What?” she cried.

“I don’t see you,” the professor repeated, still nodding and staring beyond her.

Hannah took her cue and sat in the back of the auditorium.

When Hannah took her first marine biology class as an undergraduate, she says her professor told her she didn’t have the ability to study desmids, a species of green freshwater algae which she claims are “the most beautiful sight under a microscope.” But Hannah proved him wrong by graduating Phi Beta Kappa and going on to win a Sigma XI prize for her dissertation on desmids for her Ph.D. at UPenn in 1935.

Degree in hand, Hannah traveled north that year to work as a lab technician for Dartmouth Medical School. She claims that when she taught a course for the College’s biology department fifteen years later, the professor who gave her the invitation to do so received both the recognition and the higher pay. But after years of hearing from male professors that “nobody wants to learn about algae and pond scum,” Hannah had to cap her course at forty students, which happened to be the number of available microscopes.

In the meantime, Dr. Croasdale

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Hannah Thompson Croosdale at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute in Massachusetts, where she did research for her dissertation, in the early 1930s.

continued to research the desmid taxa for arctic and subarctic freshwater forms: one-celled microscopic plants belonging to the green algae. She published research on the desmids of four continents, and her peers respected her work so much that they elected her the first female president of the Phycological Society of the Americas.

And Hannah didn't limit her invasion of historically all-male domains to academia. During World War II, when her friends suggested she help fill the manpower shortage by running a children's nursery, Hannah opted instead to serve as the first female member of Hanover's Volunteer Fire Department.

Hannah says her father always told her, "If you want something, and you think about it hard enough and try long enough, you'll get it." His advice paid off for her in the end—though she tells me this in the context of her quest for the perfect research assistant. (The assistant she in fact found, Marilyn Racine, now co-authors papers and volumes with her.) Any difficulties or setbacks Hannah faced meant little because her toil brought her pleasure. Hannah loved working in labs as well as bogs as a technician. And she enjoyed teaching, skiing, scaling mountains, and owning a home of her own. Her hometown of Dalesford, Pennsylvania, a more traditional career, and marriage would have provided few, if any, of those opportunities.

So in the 1950s and 60s, when feminists complained that Dartmouth College marginalized women by shutting them out of employment or forcing them into menial positions, they asked Hannah for support in their protests. Hannah attended a few meetings but eventually ignored them and went back to studying her algae. To this day, Hannah mocks those protesters, calling them "whiny women's libbers" who asked for too much too soon—such as gaining equal status and salaries for equal education, and paid maternity leave.

Hannah's silence and hard work did win the appreciation of her male colleagues. The biology department named her

associate professor with tenure in 1963 and full professor in 1968. She retired in 1968 with emeritus status.

"Of course I felt used," Hannah admitted when I asked her how it felt to wait three decades to get tenure. "But the situation was love it or leave it, and I loved my work too much to leave."

Hannah still refuses to leave, let alone quit, after twenty years of retirement. Though she now admittedly spends most of her time finding things, Hannah wakes up every day to organize her desmid diagrams with a half dozen different lenses and magnifying glasses to finish a key for a volume on desmids. She receives massage therapy off and on to limber her muscles. And in hopes of growing vegetables, Hannah hacks away at the witch grass that somehow manages to sneak into and take over the garden every year.

When I complained to Hannah about the woodchucks that get into our garden at night and demolish everything at ground level, she wistfully mentioned the slim possibility of getting a license from the town of Norwich to use heavy artillery in the back yard. But she also informed me that I should have planted more seeds.

After I demanded why, Hannah improvised on an old adage and told me that I should have sacrificed, planting "four for the woodchucks, three for the crows, two for the birds, and one to grow."

I interpret Hannah's retort as a metaphor for her outlook on life: she sows carefully, abundantly, and persistently, always hoping to harvest, but she also respects the fact that scavengers exist naturally and knows that no farmer can control the weather. I have little room to reconcile such views with those of my generation, which associates silence with death, other than as a reminder that if I love seeding and weeding as much as harvesting, my persistence just might keep the woodchucks at bay.

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