

Researcher-matchmakers mix biochemistry with social chemistry

It's hard to decide if they're more unlikely as researchers, matchmakers, or TV personalities, but Dr. Nancy Beck and Bridget Decker are all three. In the lab, Beck, a postdoctoral fellow in microbiology, and Decker, a graduate student in biochemistry, work "mostly with men, who complain that they can't find anyone to date in the Upper Valley." And they also happen to have a friend who works at Hanover's public-access television station. So the pair, who were looking for something to do with their creative energies, put one and one together and came up with a TV show for singles.

Joke: It's not quite like any show you've ever seen. Beck—who is dark and glamorously made-up—and Decker—who has a goofy laugh and a more than passing resemblance to actress Drew Barrymore—sit on a brown velvet couch in a vintage clothing store and giggle at their own and each other's jokes as their interviewees, mostly men, answer questions about themselves.

The production values remain solidly in the cable-access realm, though there's some mildly adventurous camera work and viewers occasionally get to see the studio audience, which includes people standing on chairs, beers in hand, to get a better view.

The show's name, *Fresh Meet*, is a wee bit naughty, like Beck and Decker. They're the two

women who, if you knew them, you'd never have a dinner party and not invite, because they're lively and funny and unselfconsciously interested in other people. "We're the most popular show on the station," Decker says, and then asks not to be quoted, "because we don't want to make Roz, the Humane Society lady, feel bad. She used to be the most popular show. And we want her to come on *our* show."

Beck says their secret is that "we don't ask the cheesy questions. We focus on the interviewees themselves, not what they're looking for in a date. It makes people feel pretty comfortable, and their personalities come out through their body language and their interactions with us." It may also help that the hosts themselves are not in the dating market—Beck is married and Decker has a significant other.

They both work in labs that study yeast but point out that Decker's work, in Dr. William Wickner's biochemistry lab, is with "friendly bread yeast," while Beck's, in Dr. Deborah Hogan's microbiology lab, is with "pathologically nasty yeast."

Mate: "What we study has nothing to do with dating," Decker says. "Except occasionally," Beck adds, "you do get the yeast to mate." Which may be even harder than encouraging Upper Valley residents to do the same. M.M.

Hospital president James Varnum plans to retire in 2006

James Varnum, the president of Mary Hitchcock Memorial Hospital for the past 27 years, has announced that he will retire in April 2006.

His has been a career marked by both constancy and change. He has been the president of MHMH since 1978 and of the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Alliance (DHA) since 1983. Yet stasis in his title has not meant stasis in the organizations he's headed. With the leaders of Dartmouth Medical School and the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Clinic, he has played a major role in bringing DHMC to national prominence.

"Jim Varnum is an exceptional leader who is respected not only in the Upper Valley but also nationally," said Alfred Griggs, chair of the MHMH and DHMC Boards, in an announcement of the retirement. "Jim has managed a very large, complex organization in an ever-changing environment by keeping foremost in his mind the importance of people. The result is that loyalty to Jim goes down the organizational structure as well as up."

Consortium: Among Varnum's achievements have been guiding the hospital through its 1991 move from Hanover to Lebanon, overseeing a subsequent \$224-million expansion of the Lebanon campus, and establishing the DHA—now a consortium of 11 hospitals and organizations in New Hampshire, Vermont, and Massachusetts. His commitment

CHRIS MILLIMAN



Bridget Decker (left) and Nancy Beck spend days in the lab and occasional nights as matchmakers on a cable TV show.



Jim Varnum has been president of Mary Hitchcock Hospital since 1978. He will be retiring as of April 2006.

to this regional network—which is based on strong, independent community hospitals—has contributed significantly to the quality of care in the region, according to Mary Susan Leahy, chair of the DHA Trustees.

Roots: “Jim never forgot Mary Hitchcock’s roots as a community hospital,” Leahy said in the announcement. “His passionate belief in patients being able to receive care in their own community when appropriate, backed by the services and resources of a major teaching hospital, was the founding impetus for the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Alliance. He brought a new spirit of cooperation and collaboration to the region that has benefited hospitals, communities, and the patients we all serve.”

A 1962 graduate of Dartmouth College, Varnum earned a master’s in hospital administration at the University of Michigan. He was CEO of the University of Washington Hospital and of the University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics before returning to Hanover to lead Mary Hitchcock.

ALAN SMITHEE

CLINICAL OBSERVATION

In this section, we highlight the human side of clinical academic medicine, putting a few questions to a physician at DMS-DHMC.

Kristine Karlson, M.D.
Assistant Professor of Community and Family Medicine and of Surgery

Karlson joined the faculty in 1997. Winner of two world championships in rowing, she was also team physician for the U.S. National Rowing Team at the 2000 World Championships.

What made you decide to become a physician?

I can’t remember actually making the decision. Since high school, it seemed somehow the right place for me and nothing ever changed my mind.

What are your clinical interests?

I trained as a family physician first, then did a fellowship in sports medicine. I see both primary-care patients and sports-medicine patients. I enjoy the challenges and joys of following people over time but also am happy that I can combine my medicine and athletic backgrounds in providing care for athletic people of all ages.

What books have you read recently?

Alice Sebold’s books *The Lovely Bones* and *Lucky* are two I’ve read recently. In both she addresses violence from interesting perspectives.

What’s your favorite nonwork activity?

Since 1997 I have really gotten excited about cross-country skiing, particularly skate-skiing. It’s such a joy to be out in the woods on a clear winter day in a fast, fluid workout.

What about you would surprise most people?

I was not an athlete until college. My mother still says that if she had to pick which one of her five kids would have made an Olympic team, it definitely would not have been me. (I was on the 1992 Olympic rowing team and on four national rowing teams in the years prior to that.)

What do family and friends give you a hard time about?

Patience. When I decide I want to get something done, I usually want to do it now.

Of what professional accomplishment are you most proud?

Having been board certified in sports medicine in only 1999, I was asked in 2002 to be on the committee that writes the board exam and was subsequently asked to chair the committee. It was a major honor and I think happened because I studied very hard for the exam and did very well on it. A smart colleague who I respect had failed the exam, which got me scared, so I studied harder than I would otherwise have—but it paid off!

What advice would you offer to someone contemplating going into your field?

Students interested in family medicine and other primary-care specialties are given a hard time by specialists who say they are wasting their talents. But where else do people come in with a variety of complaints and undifferentiated problems, asking you to figure it out? By the time a patient reaches a specialist, somebody else has often already made a diagnosis and decided which specialist should see the patient. But we juggle a lot of potential diagnoses and start the process to find the right one.

What’s the hardest lesson you ever had to learn?

That hard work and wanting something badly don’t necessarily mean you’ll get it. After my sports fellowship, I trained again for rowing and tried but failed to make the 1996 Olympic team.



I have no regrets—it was worth trying, but it was a disappointment.

If you could live in any time period, when would it be?

Maybe turn the clock back 30 to 40 years. It’s tempting to yearn for simpler and safer times. However, in almost any other time period my opportunities as a woman in both medicine and sports would have been significantly more limited or nonexistent.

