

Finding my way to a second half

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This spring I am experiencing the fruition of a slow change in my career trajectory. I was trained as a geophysicist at a time when the field was not friendly to women. I gave it my best, but it was miserable. I found another place to apply my training, moving to ecological modeling after my first child was born, focusing primarily on modeling within-host interactions between pathogens and the immune system initially, and later moving to food chain systems in temperate lakes. Then a second child came, and 8 weeks after he was born, I returned to my research position at Cornell, pumping milk in the broom closet because there was no lactation space. Fourteen years passed in this way – I was a half-time researcher and full-time Mother. During this period, I transitioned from writing and simulating equations to wrangling biological data, and I came to the decision to return to school as a biostatistician gradually, one class at a time, thanks to the employee education program at Cornell.

In Fall 2018, my kids left home. My daughter enrolled at Cornell as a math student and my son, a stellar 14-year-old cellist, enrolled in a program at Juilliard. I chose SUNY Albany because of its reputation and proximity to the city, and committed fully to my goal of transforming myself into a computational statistician. My motivations were threefold: (1) I sought renewed possibility of interesting, challenging and beneficial work as a quantitative researcher in Public Health; (2) my research had become increasingly data-driven, and (3) finally, I recently launched both of my children into their own educational adventures, which freed me to return wholly to mine.

My arrival at SUNY coincided with hard times for my major field, biostatistics, at the School of Public Health. We lost multiple faculty members in a very contracted period, and I was concerned that my terminal degree, the PhD, would not happen. So, I signed up for something on a shorter timeline ... an MS in Biostatistics! I defended my thesis by phone (my husband and I had no internet that day) in early January 2021. I did a wonderful project – it occupied my mind, spirit and time during the first months of the pandemic and gave me a sense of purpose and focus, even if the topic, missing cause-of-death information in national opioid mortalities by county from 2010 to 2016, was a little grim.

And when we returned to in person classes, SUNY was still perfect for me, because there was a very fine math department and a wonderful data science program to elbow my way into. Which, indeed, I did, thanks to the kindness of instructors who accepted a statistician into courses labeled “data science students only.” I decided to acquire that data science MS last fall – given all the courses I’d taken - and will graduate in May.

SUNY also became my research home. I found interesting work in several groups, starting with Erin Bell in early 2020 as a biostatistician for the Upstate KIDS project, a productive relationship that continues today, and in 2021, with Kai Zhang in Environmental Health, looking at the associations between the urban environmental exposome and socio-economic determinants of health in the CARDIA cohort. I also moonlight with David Carpenter’s group at the Institute for Health and the Environment,

where I am a statistical consultant since February 2022. (Yes, he hasn't posted my picture on the website, so please call him and ask him to put me up there.)

So, what is the punchline? I am now a senior statistician (hybrid/remote) and deputy group leader at Bassett Research Institute in Cooperstown since February 2023. I am still enjoying a few last math classes for my second MS, and pondering next steps for my intellectual life, which, as always, is restless and searching. This isn't exactly what I planned – I came for a PhD – but I've learned more than I expected to learn, and am eagerly embarking, at the age of 61, on my second half.