

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

**WILMA M. WASCO**

The Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences

Transcript of an Interview  
Conducted by

William Van Benschoten

at

Massachusetts General Hospital  
Boston, Massachusetts

on

2, 3, and 4 October 2002

From the Original Collection of the University of California, Los Angeles



Wilma M. Wasco

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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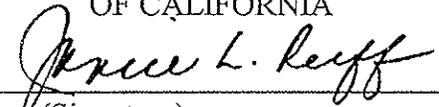
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INTERVIEWEE

THE REGENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY  
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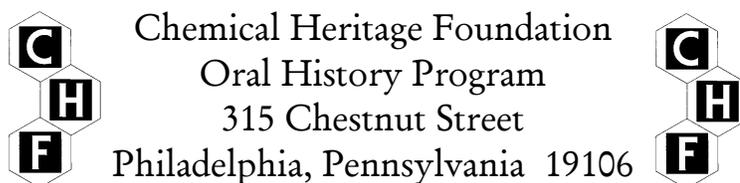
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## WILMA M. WASCO

1959 Born in Bridgeport, Connecticut, on 18 August

### Education

1981 B.S., Biology, University of Connecticut, Storrs, Connecticut  
1983 M.S., Molecular Pharmacology, Albert Einstein College of Medicine  
1987 Ph.D., Molecular Pharmacology, Albert Einstein College of Medicine

### Professional Experience

1987-1991 Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
Postdoctoral Fellow, Center for Cancer Research, Department  
of Biology

1991-1993 Harvard University  
Research Fellow, Department of Neurology  
1993-1994 Instructor, Department of Neurology  
1994-present Assistant Professor, Department of Neurology

1991-1993 Massachusetts General Hospital  
Research Fellow, Neurology Service  
1993-present Assistant Geneticist, Neurology Service

### Honors

1987 National Research Service Award  
1993 Becton-Dickinson Research Fellowship Award  
1997-2001 Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences Grant  
2000 MGH Women's Career Faculty Development Award

### Selected Publications

Wasco, W.M. and Orr, G.A. (1984) Function of calmodulin in mammalian sperm: presence of a calmodulin-dependent cyclic nucleotide phosphodiesterase associated with demembranated rat caudal epididymal sperm. *Biochem. Biophys. Res. Commun.* 118:636-642.  
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- \* *The first two authors contributed equally to this publication.*
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## ABSTRACT

**Wilma M. Wasco** was raised in Fairfield, Connecticut—a town about forty-five minutes away from New York City—the oldest of three siblings. Her father was a lawyer and had a profound love of jazz music, also, later in life, he suffered from multiple sclerosis; her mother worked for a telephone company until her children were born and then, when older, pursued an interest in her own artistic expression. Wasco loved to read and play as a child, and for a time took music lessons from a jazz-artist who was a friend of her father. Her family was close-knit: they often took day trips together around the state. After some time in parochial school, Wasco entered the public system for junior high and high schools. She first became interested in science in the eighth grade due to a teacher, Mr. Somaski, but she was still uncertain of what career she wanted to pursue.

She chose to attend the University of Connecticut for her undergraduate degree. Due to registration difficulties she was unable to enroll in science classes until her sophomore year, at which point she took an honors chemistry course, interesting her in science; she chose her major (biology) in her junior year, and only then began taking biology courses. While still an undergraduate she worked for Guillermo Fallar, a neuroscientist, and Ian McClellan, biochemist, in a neurobiology laboratory and she decided to go to graduate school. She wanted to study molecular pharmacology and she applied to and was accepted at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. While there she conducted her thesis research with George A. Orr, with whom she published her first paper, on calmodulin. From New York she moved on to a postdoctoral position at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, working with Frank Solomon on microtubular-associated proteins, specifically identifying and characterizing amyloid precursor-like protein 1 (APLP1); during her studies she received a National Research Service Award. She then became a Research Fellow in the neurology department at Harvard University and held a joint position with Massachusetts General Hospital, at which time she was working with Rudolph E. Tanzi (Pew Scholar Class of 1993) on cloning amyloid precursor-like protein 1 (APLP1). Wasco remained at Harvard University, becoming an assistant professor researching neuronal cell death in normal and neurodegenerative cells with implications for Alzheimer's disease research, and becoming an assistant geneticist at Massachusetts General Hospital.

The interview ends with Wasco discussing her work on presenilin 2; her research on calsenilin and amyloid precursor-like proteins, the long- and short-term applications of her work; and her opinion of biomedical research funding in the United States. She concludes with thoughts on balancing family and career; the privatization of scientific research; competition and collaboration in science; the national agenda for science; scientists and public policy; science literacy in the United States; and the role of the Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences in her work.

## UCLA INTERVIEW HISTORY

### INTERVIEWER:

William Van Benschoten, Interviewer, UCLA Oral History Program. B.A., History, University of California, Riverside; M.A., History, University of California, Riverside; C. Phil., History, UCLA

### TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

**Place:** Wasco's office, Massachusetts General Hospital.

**Dates, length of sessions:** October 2, 2002; October 3, 2002; and October 4, 2002.

**Total number of recorded hours:** 5.0

**Persons present during interview:** Wasco and Van Benschoten.

### CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

This interview is one in a series with Pew Scholars in the Biomedical Sciences conducted by the UCLA Oral History Program in conjunction with the Pew Charitable Trusts's Pew Scholars in the Biomedical Sciences Oral History and Archives Project. The project has been designed to document the backgrounds, education, and research of biomedical scientists awarded four-year Pew scholarships since 1988.

To provide an overall framework for project interviews, the director of the UCLA Oral History Program and three UCLA faculty project consultants developed a topic outline. In preparing for this interview, Van Benschoten held a telephone preinterview conversation with Wanda Wasco to obtain written background information (curriculum vitae, copies of published articles, etc.) and agree on an interviewing schedule. He also reviewed prior Pew scholars' interviews and the documentation in Wasco's file at the Pew Scholars Program office in San Francisco, including the proposal application, letters of recommendation, and reviews by Pew Scholars Program national advisory committee members.

### ORIGINAL EDITING:

Carol L. Squires edited the interview. She checked the verbatim transcript of the interview against the original tape recordings, edited for punctuation, paragraphing, and spelling, and verified proper names. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed.

Wasco did not review the transcript. Consequently, many proper names remain unverified.

Carol L. Squires prepared the table of contents. Victoria Simmons compiled the

interview history. TechniType Transcriptions compiled the index.

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