



Fall 9-13-2012

Immortal Life Author: "Follow Your Curiosity"

Tim Obermiller
Illinois Wesleyan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news>

Recommended Citation

Obermiller, Tim, "Immortal Life Author: "Follow Your Curiosity"" (2012). *News and Events*. 1976.

<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/1976>

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Immortal Life Author: "Follow Your Curiosity"

Sept. 13, 2012

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — Author Rebecca Skloot first learned about the subject of her acclaimed nonfiction bestseller, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, when she was only 16 years old. While earning a science credit at a community college, her instructor told the class about HeLa cells. Used in experiments for decades, the cells and their unusual reproductive properties enabled countless scientific breakthroughs, including the polio vaccine, cloning, gene mapping and in vitro fertilization.

On the blackboard, the instructor wrote the name of a woman who was the cells' donor, Henrietta Lacks, and then said, "She was a black woman."

Skloot's mind became filled with questions about the woman — questions that eventually led her on a journey that changed both her life and the lives of Henrietta's family members. She shared details of this journey with students, faculty and staff who attended the annual President's Convocation in Presser Hall's Westbrook Auditorium on Wednesday, Sept. 12.

As the selection for this year's Summer Reading Program, Skloot's book was read by all incoming first-year students and then discussed in groups led by faculty, staff and alumni as part of the "Turning Titan" orientation in August. The book was chosen because of important questions it raises about human rights and medical ethics. Henrietta Lacks — Skloot learned through years of exhaustive research — was a poor tobacco farmer who was never asked about allowing her cervical cancer cells to be used for research before she died in the "colored" ward of Johns Hopkins Hospital in 1951. Despite the millions of dollars that her "immortal" line of cells generated, Lacks' family did not benefit from those profits — in fact, they were unable even to afford medical insurance for treatment of illnesses that Henrietta's cells had helped cure.



Rebecca Skloot



Henrietta Lacks

After publishing her book, Skloot founded the **Henrietta Lacks Foundation**, which strives to provide financial assistance to other disadvantaged and unacknowledged contributors to science.

In introducing Skloot as the convocation's keynote speaker, Provost Jonathan Green said the book has been an effective "touchstone across the campus for this year's theme of **human rights and social justice**," which is being promoted this academic year in courses, events and initiatives on campus and in the surrounding community.

"Many of the tragedies of the Lacks story were failures of communication," said Green. "And one of the most important elements for us is that many of these failures occurred in institutions of higher learning. How committed are we to ensuring that all members of our community are brought into important conversations as partners? How persistent are we to be sure that underrepresented voices are heard?"

In her speech, Skloot talked about her unlikely path to becoming an award-winning science writer. She had been a rebellious and low-performing student up until high school. “I just didn’t show up because I found the whole thing really boring,” she said. That changed when she first heard about Henrietta Lacks and approached her teacher after class to learn more.

“I started asking all these questions. What else do we know? Did she have any kids? What do they think about part of their mother being alive all these years after she died? And he just said, sorry that’s all we know. But if you’re curious go and do some research and see if you can find anything, write a little something and I’ll give you extra credit.”

Though she couldn’t find answers at first, the idea of pursuing her questions kindled a newfound interest in academics. As a student at Colorado State, she focused on her childhood dream of becoming a veterinarian, taking courses in biology and chemistry. Told that she could meet her foreign-language requirement by taking a creative writing class, she decided to enroll. Her first assignment was to describe a place, and she chose the university’s animal morgue where she worked. She was amazed when a classroom discussion about her paper led to a passionate debate about animal rights and medical research. “I thought, ‘Wow, this is really cool’ — to take something you care very deeply about and, if you convey it to people through writing maybe they’ll be motivated to do something.” This spark led to her eventual path as a science writer, where she developed the tools needed to answer her long-held questions about Henrietta Lacks.

Skloot encouraged students to follow that example. “It’s wonderful to have goals and be focused,” she said. “If you’ve always wanted to be a doctor or a lawyer or an architect, that’s great. Study those things, move forward with those dreams, but don’t have tunnel vision. Don’t be so focused on those goals that you don’t allow yourself to notice other things. Things you can’t imagine as you sit here right now. Things you might fall unexpectedly in love with. Things that might change your life, just as learning about Henrietta’s cell in biology class or writing about a veterinary morgue changed mine.”

Skloot urged listeners to “follow your curiosity. Look for what I call ‘what?’ moments. Pretty much everything I’ve written started with that ‘what?’ moment. What drives the most successful and, eventually, happy people in their careers is harnessing that curiosity and training yourself to stop and notice when you’re saying, ‘What?’

“Learn to recognize those moments and to follow where they lead.”

Contact: **Tim Obermiller**, (309) 556-3183