

DARE Q & A with: Dr. Roberta Bondar



Dr. Roberta Bondar is Canada's first female astronaut and the first neurologist in space. For over a decade, she served as NASA's head of space medicine, and also served as the Chancellor of Trent University from 2003 to 2009. She is an accomplished environmental photographer and has published four photo essay books. She received her Ph.D. in Neurobiology from the University of Toronto.

Q: What is the most challenging thing you have ever had to do?

A: I had to overcome the profile of being a celebrity in one field to get people to see that I could be successful in other fields. There are people who want to pigeonhole you into one area. They don't want to allow you the flexibility to be agile and move into other areas.

The other challenge for me has been to overcome gender issues. The first time I experienced this was when I was in the eighth grade. I wanted to be a school crossing guard. In order to do this, you had to pass a safety test, and whoever scored highest got to be the captain. I aced the test, and when the headmaster made the announcement he said I had made the highest grade – but because I was a girl, I would be the lieutenant. He then named a boy to the captain's job. I was stunned, and so were my parents, who made a protest. In the end, the boy stayed the captain.

“I have worked with many men who had a hard time relating to a woman on a level that was not social.”

Many of the gender issues have been more subtle, but they are all numbing experiences. They are things that happen to you, and you know it is about you being a woman. For instance, when I was a resident in neurology, I had to change and wash up in a room with the women, who were mostly nurses and would be talking about what they would go home and cook for dinner. At the same time, my male counterparts would be washing up with the senior surgeons and discussing the cases of the day. I would miss out on this discussion, a very important part of the learning process. There have also been times when I have not been included in dinners because I was not married. Single men were included, but not me. At these dinners there was extended conversation about medical cases, and they were a missed learning opportunity for me.

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A: (cont.) not social. They did not have a skill set that allowed them to be comfortable with me in a professional setting. In one instance, I was in training for the space program, and each Friday we went to a research facility where we were put through many tests to see what our endurance was – for instance, what would our tolerance to nausea be under certain circumstances? I was in a room with the other male astronauts and they told me I needed to change in the room with them if I was going to be one of them. I took my things and I left the room. I thought to myself: “What are they going to do? Kick me out of the space program?” I decided no one was going to make me compromise my values. Values help make you as strong as you can be and they help you to keep from losing yourself.

Q: Where did you get the courage and confidence to overcome these challenges?

A: My mother was always a person who believed the glass was half-full, and that life is a wonderful experience. She taught us that heaven is here on earth. This perspective made me want to enjoy every day, and helped with my self-confidence. When I told her I wanted to go into space, she took me to the library and we studied everything we could find about space. She told me I could do anything. I have always taken courses to challenge myself and learn all that I could. I challenge myself all the time. I believe that wide reading and life experience generate my confidence.

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I have a personal credo that I have a responsibility to help others and to make them feel good. My way is to open a door for someone, to thank them, and to be a good team member. This is part of my value system and helps to boost my confidence.

Q: What is the biggest mistake you have ever made? What did you learn and how did you recover?

A: Sometimes I feel that I did not give back enough to my mother and father. I have not had time to be with them as much as I would have liked. Now that I’m older and they’re not here, I look back and wish I had given them more pleasure and made more time for them.

I’ve made lots of mistakes, but don’t recall any single one. I tried to learn from all of them.

Q: If you had a young woman you cared deeply about entering the workforce today, what single piece of advice would you have for her?

A: Keeping your passion is the most important factor in anything. There was a time when I had (continued)

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A: (*cont.*) reached a point in the space program where I was beginning to lose interest. I had begun to think of the program as a job. Then when I was actually in space, I floated over to the window to look down at Earth from space. While looking through that window, I began to think about when my sister and I played space games as children. We used to put sheets over the furniture and pretend we were in space. I thought about all the things that went into helping me get to where I now was, in that moment. That helped me regain my desire, my vision, for what I was doing. I think it is critical that we do not lose our desire and passion for what it is that we want.

Q: What advice do you have for building self-confidence?

A: From the time we are children, we have a clean slate and it depends on our support systems. They are a critical part of helping us believe in ourselves. The way I tell people to build confidence is to get involved with something you love – if you love cooking, go take cooking classes and become a great cook. If you do something you love really well, it will build your confidence. Being good at something makes you feel confident and gives you a sense that you can cope. When you get good at something, it builds your confidence and this spills over into other things.

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Before I take on any challenge, I try to be as educated as I can. I don’t want to relearn things. Getting as much knowledge as you can up-front is a more efficient way to learn something, and it will boost your confidence when you try something new. I also believe you should talk to or observe the person who is an expert at doing what you are trying to learn. For example, I’m trying to learn how to play golf, so I am reading everything I can before I begin to play and I am watching the best golfers. This will enhance my chances for success and boost my confidence.

Knowledge is the key to building confidence. Learning something makes me more confident about things and it stimulates my brain.

Q: What inspired you to pursue a career in a STEM field?

A: I was very influenced by my parents, who taught me I could be anything I wanted. They worked very hard to expose my sister and me to many different things. When we had vacations, we camped out a lot. We did not have money for expensive vacations, but what my sister and I loved was having our parents all to ourselves. Before we went camping, my parents would get books on anything we might see, for example fish. They would take us to see the fish, and then teach us about all aspects of the fish, how it (*continued*)

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A: (cont.) reproduces, what it ate, and anything else of interest. This built a tremendous interest in the environment and in biology. When I was approaching college, one of the counselors told my mother I should major in something other than science. My mother did not tell me about this until later. She was always adamant that we should pursue our dreams and whatever we were passionate about.

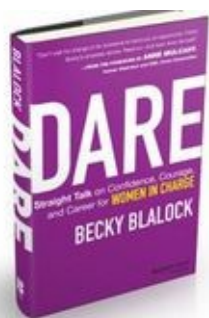
“The most important thing in life is to be ethical and to live up to your values.”

Q: Who do you admire most, and why?

A: I find people in all walks of life that I admire. People who are ethically sound, regardless of their job, and who are operating at the highest levels of their profession. This can be a surgeon or the janitor. The most important thing in life is to be ethical and to live up to your values.

Q: If you could change one thing about your career, what would it be?

A: I got injured in the space program the year before I flew because they didn't put enough padding under my neck. I knew there wasn't enough padding, but I didn't want to be perceived as a whiner and get kicked off the team. I have health issues today because I did not speak up about this issue. If I could go back in time, I would speak up and address this issue and stand up for myself more often. There were many times in the space program when I would say something and people did not take me seriously.



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