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WSU SCIENTIST'S DISCOVERY WAS 10 YEARS IN THE MAKING

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BY ROY WENZL

WICHITA - If George Bousfield's scientist friends are right about him, then the "shy little guy," as his wife calls him, may be on the way to solving some of the most frustrating mysteries of human fertility.

His discoveries so far are brilliant, his colleagues in Wichita say. The applications of what he might discover about human reproduction in the next few years could give hope to millions of women worldwide who want to be mothers.

No one could have overcome the obstacles Bousfield surmounted in the past 10 years without having harnessed not only a bright mind but also an incredible determination, those who know him said.

"Make no mistake about George," said his wife, Helen Haskin. "He's very quiet, but there's a lot of iron and steel in there."

She saw this first-hand in the past few years, after Bousfield twice was rejected for grants by the National Institutes for Health.

Ten years ago he'd discovered an important new thing about the human fertility hormone -- that there are two variations of it, not one, and that the second variation appears to act differently in the fertility process than the first.

He and other scientists knew the discovery could lead to more detailed and accurate fertility work.

Colleagues say Bousfield, who came to WSU in 1991, spent years after the hormone discovery as an underfunded, overworked scientist, preparing his proposals three times for the NIH. The proposals were detailed and more than 300 pages long.

While he was doing this, said his boss, William Hendry, he was also keeping his small lab humming. The work space on the fourth floor of Hubbard Hall is full the beakers, tubes and wires of a busy laboratory, as well as several aging and complex machines that help measure properties of human chemicals. Keeping those machines alive while doing research, teaching, and preparing the NIH proposals was a heroic effort, Hendry said.

The two NIH rejections would have discouraged anyone, said bioscientist David McDonald, head of the graduate school and associate provost at WSU.

But after both rejections, Haskin said, Bousfield went back to work more determined.

"People talk about how nice he is," said Haskin, who is an engineer for an El Dorado oil company. "But there is an enormous confidence in him."

The first time he was rejected, Haskin said, she asked him how he was doing.

She said he replied: "I know I'm right, and I'm going to keep working on it."

After the second rejection, Haskin spoke up again.

Maybe this was it, she remembers saying. After two rejections, maybe it was time to move on to some other kind of work.

"No," she said he replied, "I know they are wrong. I know there is something there to study, and I like this work and I'm going to keep working on this until I get it right."

Bousfield did more than that in winning a \$6.6 million grant from the NIH on his third try, McDonald said.

"After those rejections, he asked the NIH for feedback about every part of his work, and he took that feedback back here, and applied it to what he'd already done," McDonald said. "It was amazing how he just kept at it."

There is more to him than being a brilliant, dedicated scientist, his wife said.

Three years ago, while working long hours to prepare for the first NIH proposal, Bousfield, 57, helped save his sister's life by flying to California to donate one of his kidneys. Afterward, when he flew to Bethesda, Md., to present his case to the NIH, he was still so weak that he needed help from WSU colleagues to lift his carry-on bag into the airplane compartment. He worried that he might fall asleep from weakness during his presentation.

Beyond all that, her husband likes to read, Haskin said. He likes to spend time with her and their children, 13-year old fraternal twins.

And he likes ice dancing.

"It's not like the ice dancing in the Olympics where there are twirls and jumps, but it is choreographed like ballroom dancing, only on ice, with music, and it's great exercise," she said.

If anyone has ever noticed that her scientist husband appears to be in excellent shape, it's from ice dancing.

"I can't keep up with him," she said. "He's really good."

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