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M.R.C. Greenwood—1998 AAAS President

M.R.C. Greenwood often punctuates her conversation with vivacious laughter, especially when questioned yet one more time about what her initials stand for. "I'll tell you what I always tell the students who ask," she offered. "This is not a difficult research project. If you want to know badly enough, you can find it out, but I'm not going to give you any help." Nevertheless, Greenwood did reveal that M.R.C.—which she pronounces "Marci"—is her premarital monogram, which she has been using since she was 12 years old.

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M.R.C. Greenwood

Slated to become AAAS's next president in February 1998, Greenwood is a biologist who has conducted research in genetic obesity and diabetes for more than 25 years. She describes 1996 as a banner year for her, as she was both appointed chancellor of the University of California at Santa Cruz and named AAAS's president-elect.

Greenwood believes that improving the public's trust in science is one of the most important challenges facing the scientific community. As AAAS president, she wants to build upon the work of her predecessors and "be an articulate spokesperson for AAAS." She continued, "I want to help clarify why science is a terrific payoff for all people: we need to rebuild some of the public trust, which I believe has eroded." Public trust, she added, is particularly relevant because of its impact on R&D funding.

As the associate director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) at the White House from 1993 to 1995, Greenwood honed her skills in building partnerships. For instance, she worked closely with both a Democrat- and a Republican-controlled U.S. Congress, which helped her learn how to maintain good relationships with both political parties. She sees partnership-building as integral to the future of the scientific enterprise. "I want to help AAAS build coalitions not only among scientists, but between scientists and nonscientists," said Greenwood. She added that while AAAS has been doing this, still much more needs to be done to ensure continued progress.

As an adviser during President Clinton's first term, Greenwood was responsible for the development of science policy documents, including the Administration's statement "Science in the National Interest," which outlined why the United States must serve as an active steward for science and how it can accomplish that goal. "The statement was the result of many helping hands, but it was my responsibility to make it happen," said Greenwood. "I was very pleased to be involved, especially because this document marks the first time that an American president personally signed on to a statement for the American people that reinforced the importance of science." She added that Vice President Gore endorsed it as well.

After her term at the White House, Greenwood returned in 1995 to the University of California at Davis, where she had taken a leave from her position as dean of graduate studies and her professorship. That same year, she accepted an additional appointment as the university's vice provost for academic outreach. She also continued her own research. Greenwood is now wrapping up a few collaborative projects with her colleagues at Davis. Her work in developmental cell physiology and, more recently, in developmental molecular biology has been focused on understanding the genetics of obesity and diabetes. Greenwood's laboratory developed the lipoprotein lipase hypothesis: "We proposed that alterations in this enzyme are to a large extent responsible for the postnatal development of obesity in genetically obese rats. And this hypothesis is still generating a lot of research."

Her professional background, which encompasses experience at a range of educational institutions—from the small liberal arts college of Vassar to large research universities—has helped make science education a major focus of her concerns. "We need to help the public develop an appreciation for discovery-based knowledge and we need to do a much better job at undergraduate education—we cannot let students get out of college without some basic knowledge of science and computer technology."

Greenwood understands all the more what students and young scientists are experiencing today with their high educational expenses and the uncertain job market because she herself has come a long way. She started her undergraduate studies at Vassar in the early 1960s as a newly separated mother of a toddler son. At times, finances grew so tight, she was not sure she could continue with her schooling. "But I would get through one day, then get through the next one. I find that stepping back and looking at the humorous side of a situation helps me a lot, and I think it helps other people. You have to take your job seriously, but you can't take yourself too seriously."

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Greenwood's achievements include being elected into the Institute of Medicine at the National Academy of Sciences and receiving an award from the American Institute of Nutrition for her research on the regulation of cell development in adipose tissue. She especially cherishes a 1995 award from the American Women in Science—which she said came as a complete surprise—and her appointment to Vassar's John Guy chair in 1986, after returning to her alma mater as a professor. "It's one of the oldest chairs," she explained. "But more important to me, it had been previously held by Anita Zorzoli. She was an outstanding gerontologist, and I had the privilege of working for her in the summers [while an undergraduate]. She was one of my greatest inspirations."

Greenwood prefers to look ahead rather than to the past, especially as her AAAS presidency approaches. She is anticipating "an exceptionally exciting year," given that 1998 is AAAS's 150th anniversary, with many events planned that can enhance the Association's public image. "I see a lot of hard work ahead for our scientific community, but at the same time, I have a much more optimistic perspective than I did 2 years ago." She explained that she is encouraged by the current fiscal climate, in which the national deficit has been reduced less painfully than had been forecasted, in part because the economy has been cooperative. Now that there has been talk in the Senate of possibly expanding the science and technology budget, to perhaps even double it, Greenwood sees a great opportunity. But she also remembers the adage "Talk is cheap." "It's the hard work that takes time and commitment. That's why this is a critical time for AAAS to be very high profile in explaining what scientists do and why that work is important. We have to show that we are not a special interest group working for our particular needs, but that science benefits everyone."