

A Job Well Done



MU Alum Brandon Blakey took a winding road in his career path but finds hard work, year after year, pays off.

By John Hendel

So I guess before I even get started...” Brandon Blakey says to a full auditorium and then pauses. “In all my talks I have an agenda slide... In a sense, this is your life, Brandon Blakey. What did you do and how did you come here?”

Blakey is a youthful man and sharp, talking and moving with a salesman’s poise. It is two days before his 36th birthday. His speech this July evening is to summer scholars working with the Office of Undergraduate Research, arranged by Dr. Joel Maruniak and Dr. Linda Blockus, with whom he worked over a decade ago at the university. A little emotion touches his words because he lost a friend in the past week.

The Bond Life Sciences Center, where he now stands, never existed when he graduated from University of Missouri thirteen years ago with a Biological Sciences degree. He also graduated from Columbia’s Rock Bridge High School back in 1990 and still praises Shakespeare’s Pizza as the best in the world. Many options existed back then—medical school, perhaps, or maybe graduate school. All through college he labeled himself as premed, a fact his girlfriend and professors liked at the time, though he ultimately

decided against becoming a doctor.

“Dr. Blockus and Dr. Maruniak asked me to come talk because I didn’t follow the traditional path,” Blakey tells the students, referring to the normal narrative of undergrad, medical school or a post-doc, finding a position at an institution, and *then* potentially jumping into industry.

A series of twists and turns led Blakey directly to the biotech industry. He has worked for Applied Biosystems for the past eight years as one of their six SOLiD salespeople. Blakey sells “instruments,” priced in the range of \$500-600,000 each, and has to sell millions of dollars’ worth to get his salary, which, to be fair, exceeds six figures, includes a car, and many travel benefits. He also worked a long time to get that, working 54 hours a week on average in his 20s.

He appreciates growing up in Columbia and praises the college town opportunities. Those opportunities were what led the family to move from Chicago to mid-Missouri in 1979.

“The reason they did that was for a better life and a great education,” he explains in a rich tenor, well suited for his profession. “That was the first key cog in creating who I am.”

Blakey’s conversation flows with a

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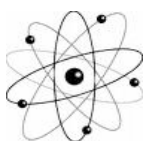


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Quote:
In need of inspiration? Look no further than our monthly quote on page 3!

natural rhythm and understanding of communication, the slick precision so instrumental to his lucrative work now. It suggests a love of people and the critical role socializing assumes in his life. No questions are off limits for Blakey—he wants to connect to the audience in front of him, whether that’s in Monsanto Auditorium or with business professionals in a conference room. Yet, as Blakey stressed to the students before him, socializing can also be difficult to master and integrate.

When describing his college life, he says he graduated with a bachelor’s in science in five years and even then, “just barely.” One challenge he initially had to overcome concerned partying. He slept through a chemistry final once, for instance, because he partied too

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UMEB Fall 2008



This year the NSF UMEB class of nine students, taught by Dr. Charles Nilon and Dr. Candace Galen,

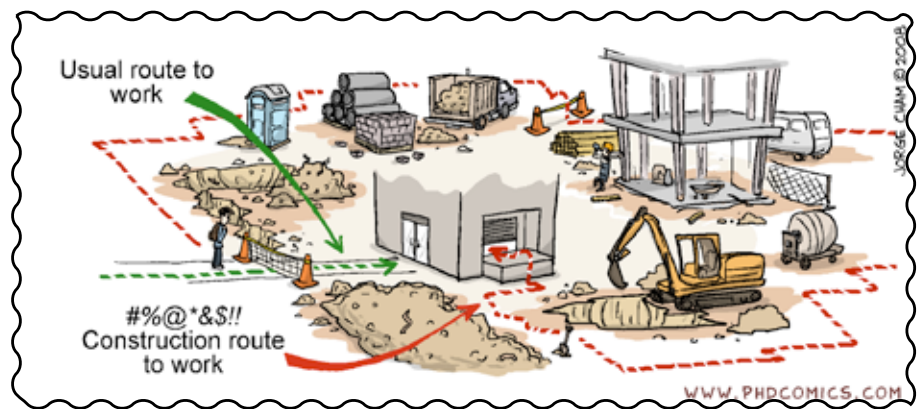
has had a strong start, with trips to Bear Creek (pictured above) and to work with the fifth graders at West Boulevard Elementary School on September 18th, as shown below:

Congratulations, Undergraduates!

Congratulations to the following undergraduates who completed a 10-session prep class for the GRE: Miriam Galenas, Jenniffer Stettler, Alyce Johnson, Krystal Purnell, Whitney Phillips, Joe Adiasor, Ray Brown, Antoinette Gray. This class was held in collaboration with MU's McNair Scholars Program.

Congratulations to senior Danielle Huff (O'Fallon, IL), who was nominated as Black Homecoming Queen for the Legion of Black Collegians Homecoming Ball 2008. The ball will take place on Thursday, October 23 at the Peachtree Banquet Hall.

Congratulations to senior Jenniffer Stettler (Potosi, MO) on being selected to receive a travel award (up to \$1500) from the Annual Biomedical Research Conference for Minority Students in Orlando, FL.



Nexus News



Dr. Blockus Goes to Washington

Undergraduate Research Director Linda Blockus will be taking a leave of absence from MU to work at the “Center for Advancing Science and Engineering Capacity” at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) in Washington, D.C. According to the Capacity Center website, “The Center provides consulting services to individual universities and colleges seeking to increase the participation of U.S. students, especially women and underrepresented minorities, in science and engineering careers.” Dr. Blockus will be organizing workshops, writing

reports, collaborating with other agencies and organizations, and consulting. She will be on leave from November 2008 through the summer.

Dr. Blockus will maintain regular e-mail and phone contact with the office staff during her leave. Program Coordinator Brian Booton will assume responsibility for the office, campus-wide initiatives, and EXPRESS. Tina Roberts has been hired to oversee LS UROP and summer science program activities beginning October 1st.

“I am really excited about the opportunities for networking and putting the information I learn to good use when

I return to MU,” says Dr. Blockus. “It’s also, frankly, really cool to be working five blocks from the White House!”

Dr. Blockus will be joining her husband, biology professor Mark Kirk, who is on leave from MU for a 1-year Science & Technology Policy Fellowship through AAAS. Dr. Kirk’s appointment is with the Office of Science Policy & Communication at the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (part of NIH). Dr. Blockus’ family is sure to be taking advantage of the nearby museums, monuments, and other activities during their time in D.C.

Swami Vivekananda, Indian spiritual leader of the Hindu religion, says...

“Take up one idea. Make that one idea your life - think of it, dream of it, live on that idea. Let the brain, muscles, nerves, every part of your body, be full of that idea, and just leave every other idea alone. This is the way to success, that is way great spiritual giants are produced.”



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hard the night before. After graduation, he worked at a hospital, and being stuck with the 3 to 11 p.m. shift, he started going out all the time after work with coworkers.

“You can party too much,” Blakey remarks. “It is possible.”

The advice of his father resonated with the young man and he refers to it multiple times within the same speech. It’s helped shape the spirit with which he approaches work. Right after graduation, as Blakey was suited up in cap and gown, his father turned to him and said, “By the way, you don’t have any health insurance any more.” That kicked in the real-world implications of the job market for Blakey. And he remembers his father’s other words of advice when weighing his social life and his future: “Sometimes your best friends can be your worst enemies.”

Professional possibilities never disappeared, and Brandon Blakey always kept busy throughout the years. During his undergraduate years, he was a resident advisor in the dorms and served many research internships. And later, even though the MCAT decreased in priority, he was still considering a master’s in

public health. Restlessness led him to look for better jobs and he landed a gig in St. Louis at a company called Genome Systems as their 28th employee in the mid-90s. This was his first leap into industry.

His science background and renewed work ethic provided him with the backbone to deal with the biotech industry in various capacities during those early years. During his undergraduate years at MU, he had completed a summer internship with biochemistry professor Dr. Frank Schmidt. He has dealt with DNA sequencing since 1996. Work never stopped and on top of his job at Genome Systems, he also worked at the WB Store in a mall and at Barnes-Jewish Hospital. In 1999 he jumped over to Sigma-Aldrich, a biotech company that served as a “mini-grad school” for him where he essentially had to defend a thesis every month, in his words, “and they destroyed me.”

But for Blakey, the realities of business, communication, and science—and how they all intersect—come together with clarity. By 2000, he left Sigma-Aldrich to become a Field Applications Specialist at Applied Biosystems, the company he has remained at

for the past eight years. He speaks easily about intellectual copyright issues, mergers, and the need for professional interviewing etiquette. He acknowledges discrimination and racism can exist in the sciences, but moves beyond it regularly, though voluntarily places himself in situations where he is the only black individual.

Blakey’s present life contains a lot of what he calls “normalcy” now, a cat and a fiancée. He stresses that learning never stops. He even ponders pursuing an MBA. Only possibility remains.

“I work a lot,” Blakey says, “and I think it does make a difference.”



Health Sciences Research Day

This year Health Science Research Day is happening on Thursday, November 6th, 2008. All events will be held in the J. Otto Lottes Library Gallery, the adjoining Acuff Auditorium, and the School of Nursing.

* 9:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m. Poster Session - Category I – HS Library Gallery (Health Professions Students, Medical Students, Nursing Students and undergraduates)

* 9:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m. Poster Session Category II - School of Nursing Atrium (Graduate Students, Post-Doctoral Research Fellows, Medical Fellows, and Residents)

* 12:00 p.m. - 1:00 p.m. - Spurgeon Award Keynote Address - Acuff Auditorium

* 1:00 p.m. Awards Ceremony – Acuff Auditorium



What is the NEXUS newsletter anyway?



Our purpose is to create a network for minority undergraduate students, graduate students, post-bac students, post-docs and faculty in the life sciences on this campus. We believe that purposefully creating a network and community will have several benefits: (1) younger students can benefit from older scientists through networking and role modeling; (2) older scientists can have the satisfaction of helping those younger through the pipeline, all members can benefit from mutual support; (3) the community can work together to host speakers of common interest; (4) information on programs, grants and other opportunities can be effectively shared; and (5) the university can take pride in the ongoing campus efforts to diversify the biomedical/life sciences research workforce from the undergraduate to faculty level.

Nexus (nex-us n)

1. a connection associating two or more people or things
2. a group or series of connected individuals or things
3. the center or focus of something
4. a specialized area of the cellular membrane that helps cells to communicate or adhere

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The Office of Undergraduate Research, located at 150 Bond Life Sciences Center, composes and designs the newsletter. If you would like to contribute something to the newsletter (award announcement, science joke, story, etc.), contact graduate assistant John Hendel at JDHendel@gmail.com or 314-920-5880.

