

Carissa Gilman: Taking the Reins During Uncertain Times

Jonathan Schultz

This isn't how Carissa Gilman thought her year as President of the CSE would start. But here we are, almost half a year into a global pandemic that has pushed everything into a constant state of flux and uncertainty. As a scientific publishing veteran, having worked for both authors and editors, and now as Managing Editor of the American Cancer Society's journal *Cancer*, she's seen many changes to the publishing landscape, so I thought it would be a good time to talk with her about her experiences, CSE in particular. In early July, I spoke with Carissa about her life in publishing, her love of horses and dogs, and the challenges and opportunities ahead for CSE and scientific publishing.

Science Editor: How did you get involved in science editing and production?

Carissa Gilman: I got my degree in English, and when I got out of college, I was just looking for any job where I could use my degree that was not teaching. I was looking in the newspaper (that's how long ago it was) for any job that I thought applied. There was an editorial assistant position and I just saw the word "editorial" and zeroed in on it. It was at a nonprofit health services research organization, so I started my career in scholarly publishing as an author's editor. I helped researchers prepare and submit their papers to journals and, like a lot of nonprofits, it had some funding issues: I saw the writing on the wall and thought that I should look for something else and saw an assistant managing editor position at Emory at *The American Journal of Human Genetics*. That's how I ended up moving over to the journal side of things. After that, I have worked at the American Cancer Society for 14 years—during that time having served as the Managing Editor for all three journals at one time or another. I moved over to the highest volume journal, *Cancer*, in 2009 and that is where I have been ever since.

I do think that having that experience as an author's editor and actually submitting to journals was really valuable in helping me understand where authors are coming from and what's important to them, and what their



pain points are. Even though that was a very short period of time of my career, I'm really glad I had that experience: You have a paper and you meticulously go through the author instructions to make sure that you're following their guidelines and reformatting things and all that. And then it immediately gets rejected. It's just... deflating. So, I have a lot of sympathy for authors in that situation. At the same time, I am also very judgmental when they do things like forget to change the journal name on their cover letter, because I'm like, you need to be more careful. I would never have made that mistake. [Laughs]

Science Editor: What do you find that you enjoy the most about this career?

Carissa: I have worked at nonprofits my entire career, and it's important to me to do something where I feel like I'm contributing to the greater good of society. And for me, scholarly publishing fulfills that need. I do think the work we do ultimately improves the lives of people who are impacted by cancer, speaking from my experience specifically. I also really love having a finished product: Every two weeks when an issue publishes, I have this tangible product that I helped create. And I love the working relationships. I have a great, great relationship with my editor-in-chief, a great relationship with my journals team. Many of us have worked together for 14 years or more, in some cases, so we have a really strong bond. With any job, it's the personal relationships that make it fulfilling and worthwhile, along with feeling like you have done something concrete that may help people down the line.

JONATHAN SCHULTZ is Editor-in-Chief, *Science Editor*, and Director, Journal Operations, American Heart Association.

CONTINUED

Science Editor: Speaking of relationships, how are you maintaining those relationships in this all virtual world we're in now?

Carissa: I am missing having that face-to-face interaction with people. We all used to go to lunch together on Thursdays, and it was a really nice time to get away from work and just talk. We now have a weekly Microsoft Teams virtual video conference where we do the same thing: We don't talk about work, we just talk about how your week is going and what's going on with you. And then we'll have a theme of the week, like what was your first concert (Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton "Islands in the Stream" tour at the Omni). Just to try to maintain that personal connection with people, but it's not the same.

Science Editor: Have you had any success connecting with editors or authors in a similar way?

Carissa: That's a good question. So, we're currently planning our first virtual editorial board meeting, probably in October. I'm very curious to see how that experience is different. Just based on what the experience was like having the CSE annual meeting virtually, I think you do lose some things, but then there are some things you gain unexpectedly. It will be interesting to see if we have some different interactions or engagement from people that normally don't attend the in-person meeting. So I'm curious: Have you had a virtual editorial board meeting?

Science Editor: One of our (American Heart Association) journals has actually done it, and one is being planned right now. The one that did it liked, as you just alluded to, that they got more attendance than they ever had for the in-person ones prior, including people who normally couldn't travel. Now it's just a matter of staying up really late at night to attend, depending on the time zone.

Carissa: Right. But I have been a little sad because we always have our pre-editorial board meeting dinner with the editor and publisher, and I know that's not going to happen. It's just a different interaction and I don't know what would take the place of that, so we'll see.

Science Editor: If you hadn't ended up in scientific editing, what do you think you would be doing instead?

Carissa: So, I really wanted to work with horses for a living and I always thought that's what I would do. And there's a part of me that's still dismayed that that didn't happen. I only agreed with my parents to go to college if I could major in equine science, and I applied to Brenau Women's College in Gainesville, Georgia, because they had an equine science program and you could take your horse with you. I got a scholarship, but by the time I arrived, they had discontinued

the program. But I had enough AP credits to exempt out of my freshmen core English classes, so that's how I became an English major. It was not by design. By the time I graduated, I just felt like I wasn't on that path anymore to pursue a career in the horse industry: it's not common to have an English degree and then start going back to managing a barn or whatever. I do own a horse and riding is my primary interest outside of work, but I had always planned for it to just be my entire life. And that's not how things turned out.

Science Editor: Do you treat dealing with a new editor as breaking in a steed?

Carissa: Well, I had not thought of it like that, but my philosophy toward training my horse is to just stuff treats in his face. So I guess maybe that works with editors too. It's positive reinforcement.

Science Editor: As the current president, I want to talk a little bit about CSE. What has CSE meant to you over the years?

Carissa: CSE has been my primary professional organization, the one that I've been most involved in. The reason that happened I think is because I was mentored within the organization. Angela Cochran was my colleague at the American Cancer Society, and she was heavily involved with CSE, and she's the one that got me more involved. To me, the mentorship aspect of CSE is one of the things that's made it most special to me. One of its greatest strengths is that there are members who are open and willing to mentoring early career professionals. I find it to be a great collegial organization that has opportunity for people who do want to be more involved. There are not a lot of barriers to entry: If you want to be, you can be on a committee or become a committee chair and be more involved with the organization. I think that's always something we need to work on is to make sure that people know they can join committees and be involved.

That's what my experience was like when I was a young professional coming up in scholarly publishing. I remember so clearly that first time going to my first Short Course for Managing Editors and just having that realization that other people have the same problems I do, the same pain points, and have had the same experiences. It was so eye opening for me. A lot of times when you're starting your career in scholarly publishing, at least back in the day where the journal offices moved with a change in editorship, you were surrounded by people who didn't do what you did, who didn't even know what you did. And we were in a basement office kind of by ourselves. That's why CSE was such an incredible resource for me is because I felt so isolated in my career at this larger university where I didn't know how to find other people that worked in journal offices. It just really

CONTINUED

opened my eyes to what was out there and that there was an entire career network out there for people who did what I did. I just fell in love with the organization and it's meant so much to me. Being able to serve on the board is such a privilege to me just because of what it's meant to my career.

Science Editor: This is obviously a very unusual year in which to be president. Do you have a vision for what you want to accomplish this year?

Carissa: I mean saying it's unusual is kind of an understatement. It's an extremely challenging year and it's nothing like what I thought it would be. I'm trying to look at it as an opportunity to innovate and kind of rethink some of what we do. To ask ourselves how we can serve our membership when they are as challenged by the situation as we are as an organization. How can we recruit and retain members who are facing reduced budgets at their organizations or personally? How can we reach out to them when we do not have the in-person meeting as an option? How can we better serve our members in this time of incredible need, because I think people need us more than ever? And so we need to really find ways that we can fulfill that need and reach out to them, while at the same time facing our own revenue challenges.

Science Editor: I'm curious, is there anything that's changed this year that you hope continues, even if things go back to "normal"?

Carissa: I hope the virtual happy hours are something that we continue because they're not just for members, they're for anybody where you can get together with your colleagues and talk. I also think we had talked a lot about offering our educational programming virtually but were hesitating on taking the plunge, and this has forced us to take that plunge. I think virtual programming is absolutely something we should be doing to reach a wider audience. And so I absolutely know that that will continue: Even once (if?) we are able to meet in person again, I think there will be some virtual programming that will continue.

Science Editor: Is there anything that readers might be surprised to learn about you?

Carissa: The other thing I do in my free time is that I serve as the volunteer adoption coordinator for Georgia Doberman Rescue. That keeps me very, very busy, and animal rescue is not for the faint of heart. It's some of the most infuriating and rewarding work: You see the absolute worst and the absolute best of humanity. So it's a rollercoaster for sure, but it's really rewarding to get a dog

that needs a home into a forever home and see how happy they are after.

Science Editor: Doberman is an interesting breed: I'm old enough to remember when they were the scary breed everyone referenced, before Pit Bulls took that title.

Carissa: What's ironic is that when I was a small child, our neighbors had a Doberman. This was back before anybody had fences, so dogs just had the run of the neighborhood. Her name was Scarlet and she used to chase me up the jungle gym. I was terrified of her. So I think it's funny that I ended up having Dobermans and being involved in Doberman rescue because yeah, you're exactly right: They were the scary breed.

Science Editor: To wrap up, is there something that I didn't ask that you want to tell people about?

Carissa: My husband and I have been watching *Halt and Catch Fire*, the show about the eighties PC race, basically. We've been having fun reminiscing about all the technological advances that we've seen in our lifetimes. When I started as an author editorial assistant, to find those author guidelines, you had to go to the library and find the January issue and photocopy it out of the issue. Then when I was an assistant managing editor, we had to fax all the reviewer invitations. We got our submissions via snail mail. We had file cabinets with a paper folder for every manuscript, and then we FedExed a batch of papers to the publisher at end of the day. In my career, we've just seen the technology change so rapidly, but the traditional peer review model hasn't really changed in a long time.

That's been an interesting dichotomy with the COVID stuff. I see a lot of talk about digital first, not just in reference to journals, but at the American Cancer Society, we're talking about that too for patient information. But I do think a lot of journals that have been hesitating about going online-only are now making the decision to just go ahead and do it. With that move, I do worry about increasing the divide between those who have really available online access and those who don't. And I think it's the same situation with conferences and virtual. I think it's the same with our education of children going online. It really amplifies these questions about access and equity and high privilege versus low privilege. And I think even some well-meaning people are either ignoring the issue or just pretending it doesn't exist because they don't know what the solution is. That's been weighing on my mind lately: how do we ensure access for people, even when we realize that the circumstances are forcing us into this digital-first paradigm?