

Inventors From Md. Get Awards, Recognition

By Melissa Harris
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Dr. Douglas Lowy of Bethesda and John Schiller of Kensington invented a vaccine to thwart HPV, the most common sexually transmitted disease in America and the leading cause of cervical cancer. Their work is saving thousands of women's lives annually, but their role in discovering the vaccine is not and might never be well-known.

Lowy and Schiller are federal employees, inventors on government-owned patents that have been licensed to drug companies for the testing and sale of the vaccine. Thus, Merck and GlaxoSmithKline - and not Lowy and Schiller - are the public faces of the nation's battle against HPV and cervical cancer.

But this week, the National Institutes of Health researchers got their due when the Partnership for Public Service named them the 2007 Federal Employees of the Year during a ceremony at the Andrew W. Mellon Auditorium near the National Mall in Washington.

Dressed in the required attire for the event - tuxedos - Lowy, 65, and Schiller, 54, accepted the award from Health and Human Services Secretary Michael O. Leavitt and thanked the drug companies for their "tireless effort in bringing the vaccine to the market," and humbly told the audience of more than 500 people that they never expected the attention.

"I never dreamed we'd be selected for this honor," Lowy said.

After earning his doctorate at the University of Washington in Seattle in 1983, Schiller, a microbiologist, accepted a post-doctoral fellowship at NIH because his professors had spoken highly of Lowy, calling him a "a good young investigator and a good person to work for."

Lowy had just started the Laboratory of Cellular Oncology at the National Cancer Institute, and both scientists had an interest in studying papillomaviruses. HPV stands for the human papillomavirus.

The two transitioned from studying what causes the virus to working on a way to stop it without asking for anyone's approval or anyone's money. Both said that the private sector would not have afforded them such freedom.

"We have retrospective reviews of our work every four years," Schiller said. "We don't have to justify it ahead of time."

Lowy said, "They trust us to work on important issues. And if we haven't, then they say goodbye."

Schiller said he is proud that his 13-year-old daughter will get the vaccine in a few weeks. "We started working on the vaccine at about the time she was born," he said.

Schiller said he plans to take a picture of his daughter receiving the shot.

Three other Maryland residents won Service to America Medals at the Wednesday night ceremony:

National Security Medal: Anh Duong.

Duong and her team of nearly 100 federal scientists and engineers at the Naval Surface Warfare Center in Indian Head invented a bomb in 67 days.

The blast from the thermobaric, or vacuum, bomb maintains its energy over a longer time and distance, enabling it to kill people hunkered deep underground.

Her work is a significant reason that few U.S. soldiers died in hand-to-hand combat inside the Taliban's vast network of caves and tunnels in Afghanistan.

"Not only did she help us win the war, but we avoided the loss of many lives had we had to clear caves in a more traditional manner," said Navy Secretary Donald C. Winter, who presented Duong with the award.

Known as "the bomb lady" by her colleagues at the Pentagon, Duong, 47, has led the development of 10 high-performing explosives used in 18 weapons, an unprecedented number, according to the Partnership for Public Service. But how she came to Maryland is also noteworthy.

She escaped Saigon, South Vietnam, in 1975, hours before the city fell to the North Vietnamese. Her grandfather had been a member of the emperor's court, and her father was general counsel to Vietnam's national bank. But at the moment of her escape, the most important man in her family was her older brother, a lieutenant and helicopter pilot in the South Vietnamese air force.

He rescued the family, taking nearly 50 relatives into his chopper and flying them to an aircraft carrier, Duong said. On the way, because of wind shear and the large number of passengers, the family had to throw their belongings into the ocean. Duong, the youngest person on board, cried during the entire journey, refusing to give up her small bag filled with photos of her family, cat and dog.

After the family arrived in a refugee camp in the Philippines, they obtained asylum in the United States and moved to Maryland. The brother who rescued the family also lives here.

At Wednesday's ceremony, Duong of Laurel dedicated her award to "the 58,000 names on the wall of the Vietnam War memorial and the 260,000 Vietnamese who died in order for people like me to earn a second chance at freedom."

She received a standing ovation.

Backstage, she said that she rarely saw her husband, four children and dying parents during the 67 days she worked on the thermobaric bomb. Her parents died in April 2002 and August 2002, a few months after the new bomb was dropped.

"Talk about a double whammy," she said. "It was so hard to explain to them why I couldn't be there more often. But we had guys dying in Afghanistan, and we needed this bomb to spare our troops."

Call to Service Medal: Nicole Faison.

While working at the Baltimore Housing Authority, Faison stopped at Lexington Market to grab lunch and recognized the man making her sandwich. He was a tenant who had told her that he was out of work and unable to pay any more in rent to the housing authority.

Frustrated by the fraud, Faison, 36, of Glen Burnie began developing a plan to ferret out income that residents were hiding from housing officials to avoid rent increases.

She left the Housing Authority after years of fighting administrators to make necessary changes and went to work for the federal government, where an executive at the Department of Housing and Urban Development in Washington plucked her from an internship and placed her in a position where she could implement her plan.

Faison's work has eliminated an estimated \$2 billion in fraud from the nation's public housing programs. In response, the Government Accountability Office removed public housing from its "high-risk" list, home to the federal government's most mismanaged programs.

Justice and Law Enforcement Medal: John Morgan.

Before 1985, DNA profiling - the ability to link the DNA in a blood sample to an individual - didn't exist.

As science advanced, law enforcement agencies slowly discovered forgotten DNA evidence from unsolved cases inside warehouses, crime labs, medical examiner's offices, storage lockers and even detectives' desk drawers.

But law enforcement agencies often lacked the technology, expertise and cash needed to examine shelf after shelf of evidence.

In 2002, Congress approved the first federal funds to help state and local police agencies clear the backlogs and build a national database of DNA samples.

Morgan of Annapolis, a former delegate, was put in charge of the effort, called the President's DNA Initiative. Since then, more than 2 million DNA samples from convicted criminals have been analyzed, as have more than 60,000 blood samples from victims. More than 16,000 matches have been made.

Morgan also oversaw the flow of more than \$100 million to state and local crime labs for facility improvements. A producer of the CBS drama CSI and one of the stars of CSI: Miami, Jonathan Togo, presented Morgan and his team with the award.

After Sept. 11, 2001, "there was an enormous need to improve how forensic science is done," said Morgan, 43, when asked why he left a plum private-sector position at the Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory to lead the initiative.

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