

In her hometown of Delano, a farming town thirty miles north of Bakersfield, Tina Nova daydreamed as she rode atop her dad's tractor in her family's grape and orange fields.

The math and science whiz probably never dreamed that she would be where she is today—CEO and founder of a successful biotech company called Genoptix and a veteran in the local biotech community. Nova is also a board member and former chairman of Biocom, sits on the boards of Arena Pharmaceuticals and the University of San Diego, and was recently appointed to guide California's stem cell initiative.

“It didn't happen by plan—it just happened,” said Nova, with her infectious laugh.

I was always good at math and science. I always liked problem solving. But I never knew what that meant. When I went to college, everyone said, ‘Oh, you should be premed if you're good at math and science.’ So I said, ‘Oh, I'll be premed.’

It wasn't until I [had] almost graduated that I spent some time in some medical clinics doing some jobs when I said, ‘I like the lab; I don't really like this.’ Not that I don't like people, because I am a people person, but because there's a large group of people who don't take care of themselves. And—you tell them, ‘Take these antibiotics and come back in ten days,’ and they just say ‘Yeah,’ and kind of blow you off. And people who don't take care of their kids... There's a real hard side to medicine that's hard to deal with.

The stuff that was frustrating in medicine was different than the stuff that's frustrating in science. I found science more challenging, because there's this huge scientific problem, and a zillion ways to get at it. With medicine, it's not like that. It's a different way of thinking.

Nova's way of thinking has been the source of her success. After rising in the ranks at Hybritech, where she discovered a way to create a diagnostic test for prostate cancer (PSA), Nova was part of the start-up team at Ligand Pharmaceuticals and then moved to Selective Genetics, where she was the chief operating officer.

Nova then moved to Nanogen, where she was president and COO. Seven years later, she was lured to lead Genoptix, where she licensed laser technology from an engineering group from UCSD to create CancerTRAX and OptoTRAX analysis tools, which measure individual patients' responses to cancer drugs. “It's really good for patients [who] have been through therapy and tried a lot of the traditional methods already, and they don't know what to do next,” said Nova.

Nova's rise to the top hasn't been easy. “It's been tough, but I've loved every minute of it,” said Nova.

She laughs at memories of her early days at Hybritech, when she was in her twenties and the biotech field wasn't well defined.

We just worked so hard, but it was fun. You didn't want the day to end. We were solving scientific problems all the time. It was like a dream, it was like, 'OK, they need this product; go figure it out.'

And because it was so free in thinking in the way it was set up, we were really allowed to do whatever we wanted as scientists. We really didn't have people breathing down our necks saying 'You have to do it this way,' because there really wasn't A WAY of doing things yet. Everything was new...

The Hybritech experience helped in my whole career, sort of building that whole concept of doing something from beginning to the end, and following it all the way through.

And that's where I fell in love with that process, and that's where I saw that I didn't belong in a big company. I think that if I hadn't ever been through that, I would have never known.

When Eli Lilly bought Hybritech in 1986, Nova had her chance to see firsthand what working in a big company was all about. She knew almost from day one that it wasn't a good fit—even the gray wool suit she bought for her first meeting with Lilly executives was a telling sign.

I remember being just thrilled that my name was on the list and I was chosen to go. It was my first business trip (laughs). Someone's actually going to pay for me to get on an airplane, and PAY for rooms at a hotel. WOW!

I packed myself three days in advance. I was so, so excited. I went out and bought a really bad suit. I remember it. It was just so bad. I look back at that suit and I just die. It was so conservative. It was this gray jacket and pinstripe, and I was trying to look "Lilly-ish" with this little jacket and this long, pleated skirt, and this stupid, you know, rose around my neck. I looked SO bad, but I thought, 'This is perfect for the business trip.'

I remember going into this room and meeting the Lilly scientists that were there. I remember them saying, 'Oh, I have a granddaughter your age.' I heard that from several of them—and that was really weird.

Here I thought we were going to meet our equivalent. It was just odd. It was uncomfortable. They were older, and they had those pens—the Lilly pens—and they would say, 'When I was with Lilly for ten years I got this pen, and when I was with Lilly for fifteen years I got this pen, and when I

was with Lilly for twenty-five years I got this pen.’ And they’re whipping their pens out of their pockets—very proud of them—very proud of the company—it was amazing how they felt about the company, I mean, the allegiance was awesome.

It was just so odd to us, you know, a company that was so young, for people to talk about having been there for twenty-five and thirty years.

The difference between a company that was five years old and a company that was a hundred years old—when they bought us, they were one hundred years old—the way they thought was completely different.

...

They were so set in tradition. There were three different lunchrooms. There were the low-level, the mid-level managers, and the senior execs. The senior execs had a lunchroom at the top of the building with red carpet and china and real silver, and it was very different—and—there were no women. The woman at Lilly were in HR [human resources], PR [public relations], and finance—the traditionally female career path. They weren’t scientists. You didn’t see them. They had very, very few women PhDs that had risen in the ranks, there were very few female PhDs, period.

That Nova has been one of very few women in the top of her profession hasn’t phased her one bit. But it has motivated her. “It was put in front of me that women don’t do this. But I wasn’t driven away by that,” she said.

Nova doesn’t spend a lot of time dwelling on the differences between men and women. She looks at the positives and has a sense of humor about it.

I think I bring a different perspective than they do, and sometimes they bring a different perspective than I do—and they’re right. And I just listen to them—and they listen to me, and there are very few times we get to a point where we don’t agree.

I think women make the biggest mistakes when they try to think like a man. I’ve been to seminars entitled, “How to Think Like a Man.” Why would we want to do that? I just think it’s ridiculous.

You know, men have done what they’ve done and done it well for so many years, and we need to find our niche, because we have personality traits that make us unique and good at what we do. I think we’re much better on the human resource side, I think we’re much better on that compassionate side of our employees. That’s a large part of being a woman, and being a mother, and why would we want to give that up?

We’ll go someplace, and the guys will want to go play golf, and I’ll say, ‘Good, I’m going to the mall. Have fun, guys.’ Do you think I’m offended

by that? Hell, no. I get two hours at the mall without ‘em! I’m happy as a camper.

I don’t feel like I lose anything from not being part of that at all. In fact, I don’t like trying to invade it. I feel just the opposite. I don’t know why, but I’ve seen women try to change things that in my opinion aren’t changeable.

In Nova’s case, being a woman also meant being a mother. Nova has a twenty-year-old daughter and ten-year-old son. “I’m telling you, they’re the best part. They’re the hardest part, too. This is the easy stuff, coming to work. It’s being a mother that’s a hard job. It’s wonderful, though.”

Like all career women, finding a balance between career and family hasn’t been any easier for Nova.

I think of the company as the extension of me. It’s not a job—it’s part of my life. Not everyone thinks that way, and that’s good and bad, because I think a lot of other people are much more balanced than I am—in their personal life, in their work life—and they’re very good at keeping that together. I like finding people who aren’t as wacky as I am, and I admire people who are much more balanced than I am.

There were times when I said to my sick children, ‘I have to leave you with the babysitter for a couple hours, but I’ll be back.’ Then you have to say to the board, ‘I have a sick child at home, I gotta go.’ It hasn’t been easy, and there has been some guilt. But the most important thing is that my children know how much I love my job. My daughter once told me I would have made a lousy soccer mom.

With all of her successes, Nova hasn’t forgotten about her roots as a research scientist. She still likes to go into the labs and piddle around with experiments.

I feel like that’s your roots, and you really shouldn’t leave where your roots are. At Hybritech, I really felt like I was a scientist, even though I managed projects, even though they were giving me more and more responsibility as I went up the ranks, I still felt like the science was the most important.

Nova has also not forgotten the reason why she entered science in the first place.

I think if you’re so excited about what you’re doing, and look at the end and say, ‘Look what we can do with this company, look what we can be doing for people, look at the difference we’re making in people’s lives because we’re offering a better service.’ I think that if you always keep

that in front of you and remember why you're doing what you're doing,  
that will drive you.

Has Nova found fulfillment? When asked the question, she was uncharacteristically off-guard, but then characteristically humble.

Fulfilled? That's a strange word. I don't know if I ever will be. I don't feel like anything I've done is special, I don't feel like it's any big deal—I really don't. Why would I feel that way about doing what I love to do, and working hard? Which is what I've kind of decided I want to do for myself. So, I don't think successful people feel successful.

And then, Tina Nova laughed.