



Dr. Elizabeth A. Fortunato

Lee Fortunato, daughter of Bobbe and Frank, was the Salutatorian of BSHS class of 1982. At BSHS, Lee played sports and music, while endlessly pursuing her passion for dance, which continues today. Lee attended the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where she explored her other passion, science. At MIT, she pursued research in biology. However, dancing was still in her blood, and while at MIT, she danced semi-professionally. However, in 1986 as graduation approached, she decided science would be her career and dance, her creative outlet.

Graduating with a BS in Applied Biological Sciences, she worked for a year with a toxicology consulting company in Washington DC. Realizing she would rather be a “bench scientist”, Lee entered the Biology graduate program at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). Being interested in human health, Lee worked on virus/host interactions and received her Ph.D. in 1994.

Lee continued at UCSD as a postdoctoral fellow and research scientist from 1995-2000. During this period she began to work on Human Cytomegalovirus (HCMV); work she continued after establishing her own lab at the University of Idaho (UI) in 2000. HCMV is one of the leading causes of central nervous system birth defects. These defects can dramatically impact the lives of the children affected by HCMV. Lee’s research is aimed at understanding the mechanisms responsible for causing the birth defects, in hopes of someday preventing their occurrence.

Lee was recently promoted to Full Professor in the Biology Department at the UI. She was also awarded the UI President’s Mid Career Faculty Award for her achievements in teaching, research and service.

Lee teaches two classes, virology (the study of viruses) to undergraduate and graduate students and molecular biology to first year medical students. Her teaching philosophy is simple: she wants her students to learn from her, not by rote memorization and regurgitation of answers to pat questions, but with a real understanding of concepts. With this conceptual understanding, she hopes that every student will be able to apply their knowledge not only to material in her class and classes that follow, but will retain a lifelong understanding. She also teaches students one on one in her lab, where she hopes to share her passion for research.

The research program Lee created has had significant success. Her work has been published in top tier journals and she has given lectures at universities and conferences all over the world. Importantly, the impact of her work has been recognized by her peers, with grants from the March of Dimes and from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), with a prestigious RO1 independent investigator award since 2002.

The last realm of academic life is service, both to the scientific/academic community and to the community at large. For both, Lee has one philosophy: giving back is essential. This stems from her Mom, who has unwaveringly volunteered her time, energy and talents to an unending list of community organizations. Bobbe instilled in Lee a sense of commitment and service that Lee has offered to any and all her “communities”.



Lee actively serves the scientific community on many levels. Nationally, she has contributed her service on the NIH Virology B study section, where she served as a permanent member from 2010-14. She also serves as an adhoc reviewer for many journals and granting agencies in her field. Closer to home she serves as a Senior Advisory Research Committee member for the NIH-funded Idaho INBRE grant and on the Steering Committee of the Center for Reproductive Biology at Washington State University.

In the community at large, Lee was active in the local chapter of the Association for Women in Science while in San Diego, serving on their board and as the Head of Outreach. During that time she also began mentoring younger woman, first HS girls, then at UI, female undergraduates and now younger faculty colleagues. Lee has also always been an active member of her church community.

Lee met her husband John in San Diego and they were married overlooking the Pacific Ocean in 1992. They enjoy the outdoors, especially hiking and canoeing in the summer and backcountry skiing in the winter. They look forward to retiring in Hawaii in the (hopefully) not too distant future where they can get back to their other outdoor love, surfing.

