

**Parliament Hill Panelist:  
for the Era 21 Networking Breakfast for Young Canadians**

**Dr. Patrice Smith**

**Parliamentary Restaurant, Parliament Hill  
Ottawa**

**May 6, 2010**

First I would like to thank Senator Poy for the invitation to participate in this important forum.

Congratulations to those of you who were chosen to represent your schools. I hope this experience will help to motivate you in your chosen career path.

So, I am Patrice and I am a research scientist, specifically, I am a neuroscientist, which means I study the brain and how the brain functions. I will tell you today a bit about my journey to realizing my dream of becoming a scientist. I grew up in a very small community in the western part of Jamaica. I was always a very curious child. I always wanted to know how things work and why they worked the way they did. This sometimes got me into a lot of trouble growing up. I remember this one instance where I took apart my families radio just so I could figure out what was inside and which parts were important to help the radio function. Well, at least I didn't take apart the TV ... The reason I took apart the radio was that I was confident that I could put it back together. I am hoping that this confidence could help me with figuring out one of the most mysterious things around, the brain.

Growing up in Jamaica, I had a curiosity and thirst for knowledge. I also excelled academically, especially science related courses; however, I had no means of pursuing higher education – “make money sooner than later”. After graduating from high school in Jamaica, my family decided to move to Canada. When I arrived in Canada in November, I remember it was the first day of snowfall and I remember thinking “this is beautiful”. The snow was beginning to accumulate on the ground (I had never seen snow before) and I remember thinking; – how will I walk on this stuff? My mom who was already living in Canada for about a year warned me about the dangers and skill of walking on ice and I remember feeling quite scared. I remember watching “Cool Runnings” the movie about a Jamaican bobsled team that competed in the Winter Olympics and started thinking that I might start slipping and sliding and falling every few

minutes like the actors in the movie. Luckily, I somehow mastered the art of “walking on ice” and have not fallen yet ... [fingers crossed]

Aside from the obvious differences in weather in Canada, there was the obvious difference in the demographics of individuals I encountered. I knew that I should have expected this, but after living in Canada for a few months, I was surprised to learn that Canada is a very diverse place. Although, my family thought it was best that I found a job and started working ASAP, I had other plans. Right after arriving in Canada, I decided that it would be in my best interest to attend university if I were to realize my dream of becoming a scientist. I was disappointed when I applied but the universities did not recognize my credentials and so did not accept me into a university program. I decided then that it would be in my best interest to take a step back and go back to high school. (one step back two steps forward). I remember my first day of classes in the high school, the teacher said there would be a test today, however she somehow assumed that I would not be able to complete the test and mentioned that I would be excused from taking the test. I took this as a challenge and asked the teacher whether I could do the test anyway. I took the physics test and ended up with the highest mark in the class. The lesson here is that sometimes you have to take one step back in order to take two steps forward. Also, being proactive could be very important in achieving success in your chosen field. People will have their perceptions of what you can or cannot do, just based on your sex, your race or any other outward characteristic, but I truly believe that Canada really provides an exceptional array of opportunities that allows anyone to be whatever they want to be. The company you keep is also very important – they will help to guide you in the right direction.

I ended up receiving a substantial academic scholarship from the University of Ottawa. In that same year, I had the opportunity to volunteer in a research lab before starting my undergraduate studies. I volunteered in a brain research lab at the University of Ottawa for the summer months and realized that “this is what I want to do”. It combined my interest in knowing how things work and trying to figure out how things work. And what more complicated system than the brain. I was so interested in the area that the researcher at U of O decided to give me a paid job for the school year, which was great!!

In graduate school, I studied Parkinson’s disease and how to save the brain cells that are dying off in the disease. I was eager to see how this could potentially be translated into clinical application, but soon realized that it is not that simple – the brain never is. So, after finishing graduate school, I received another scholarship to Harvard, where I have since completed some exciting research showing that there is a possibility to regenerate damaged brain cells in the adult.

I now have my own lab in the Institute of Neuroscience at Carleton University. I employ several students who carry out research in my lab. I also teach university courses within the university. I love my job and it really gives me a lot of motivation to think that my work could someday help someone with brain damage.

I really believe that like some of you in the room today, my story is one of perseverance, self motivation and achievement amidst challenges. Many of you may have different ideas of your future than your parents or others around you, but it is up to you to shape your future and I really believe that a future shaped by you will be one that you will find most fulfilling.

And especially in a place like Canada, anything is possible (even for an immigrant), you just have to go for it!!