

Catalyst Profile
Stephanie Rockett

Stephanie Rockett, who graduated from WCU in 2007, is a high school dropout student who turned into a doctorate holder dedicated to harnessing the power and intellect of women.

As a chemistry lab coordinator and instructor at Salem College, an all-girls' school in Forsyth County, this WCU alumna spends 9 a.m to 5 p.m. discussing the atomic makeup of ethers and organic redox reactions.

She was not always geared toward higher education, however. In her late teens, hyped up on something similar to teenage angst, Rockett decided to forgo a high school diploma. Her dad, a disabled Vietnam vet, then cut her off financially, which led the Sylva native to clean hotel rooms at a local Hampton Inn.

Exhausted by the physical labor, Rockett began attending McDowell Technical Community College in 2003. Two years later, with hopes of simply earning a four-year degree, the former Catamount found her way to WCU—her father's alma mater.

“The setting, nestled in a valley, is idyllic to say the least,” said Rockett. “The environment was appropriate for studying and provided a comfortable place to grow academically.”

And that she did. The biology and chemistry double major soon began realizing her talents and molding them into her own “personal natural resource for career advancement.”

William Kwochka and Scott Huffman, both professors in the Chemistry and Physics Department, encouraged Rockett to apply for a Research Experience for Undergraduates at West Virginia University. The pair also brought up graduate school options, pushing her to apply to Clemson University, the University of South Carolina, and Wake Forest University.

Despite her reservations about an advanced degree, “their persistence paid off,” and in 2008, Rockett began studying Analytical Chemistry at Wake.

“Sometimes our mentors can spot in us the strengths we cannot readily see for ourselves,” she said, referring to not only Kwochka and Huffman but also her father. “So listen carefully, learning to then become your own best spokesperson.”

Down in Winston-Salem, Rockett did everything from labeling viral proteins with fluorescent dyes using capillary electrophoresis to working as a teaching assistant for general chemistry courses. For a month, she even participated in an organic synthesis project at Osaka Prefecture University in Japan.

Before graduating with the much-deserved doctorate in 2012, the WCU alumna scored a job at Piedmont Pharmaceuticals, a startup in Greensboro, as a formulation scientist. Though similar companies began reaching out and offering positions, she opted for a “different pace of life” as a research analyst at Womble Carlyle Sandridge and Rice.

Now, as an instructor at a small school of 1,100, this former Catamount touts navy rather than purple and gold. As a “Salem Spirit,” she will be involved in not just teaching students about the tenets of chemistry but also empowering young women through turning untapped talents and skills into natural resource reserves.