Designing structured nanoscale materials that exhibit extraordinary properties: a day in the life of Teri Odom

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This International Women's Day (8 March), we are exploring what a typical (or not so typical!) day entails, the best and most challenging aspects of the job, and the diversity of roles within the nanotechnology field.

In this interview, we hear from Teri Odom, Charles E. and Emma H. Morrison Professor of Chemistry and Chair of the Chemistry Department at Northwestern University (IL, USA).

Teri Odom is the Charles E. and Emma H. Morrison Professor of Chemistry and Chair of the Chemistry Department at Northwestern University.

Odom received her Bachelor of Science in Chemistry from Stanford University (CA, USA) and PhD in Chemical Physics from Harvard University (MA, USA). She carried out postdoctoral work at Harvard University before starting her independent career at Northwestern University in 2002.

Odom's research team has expertise in designing structured nanoscale materials that exhibit extraordinary size- and shape-dependent optical and physical properties. Odom is also the Editor-in-Chief of *Nano Letters*.

My alarm goes off...

And I know my 8-year-old son is already up and ready to start the day. He has read part of his book, practiced some math and eaten breakfast. He's waiting for me to finish getting ready, fill out his COVID-19 screener and drop him off at school. I can now start to focus on my vocational responsibilities en route to campus.

I'm responsible for...

A diverse community of chemistry scholars and for helping my department advance the mission of the college and the university. Currently, I serve in many leadership roles, from being the principal investigator who trains a multidisciplinary research team in nanoscience, to being the department Chair who sets the vision and finds ways to further the impact of chemistry faculty, staff and students, to being the Editor-in-Chief of *Nano Letters* who facilitates the review and acceptance of cutting-edge nanoscience research.

My 'typical' day...

Is full of meetings – and during the COVID-19 pandemic, full of Zoom meetings. I meet with my program and executive assistants, the operations director of the department, all my students and postdocs individually, and the Managing Editor of *Nano Letters*.

My meetings with group members are my favorite types of meetings; after the 20+ update meetings finish, I gain energy. Other days involve back-to-back meetings with faculty and university administrators. In the (mostly) work-from-home environment of the past 12 months, the 'typical' days and weeks often feel like Groundhog Day. I find I need to practice and choose positivity to overcome the seemingly unchanging routine.

The strangest thing that has happened...

...during the pandemic is that despite the lack of travel and in-person gatherings, I have made even more connections with different people – just virtually! I have participated in more STEM outreach, from discussions with local high school students about women in STEM, to national student organizations about college, science and research, to audiences in Asia and the Middle East interested in scientific writing and publishing their research.

Also, in another strange but profound way, the world became 'flatter', as students had access to talks presented by Nobel Prize winners; no one needed to travel and no fees were required for the webinars.

The best parts of my job...

Are finding ways for others to achieve their personal goals that can then contribute to community success. I keep learning by listening to different cohorts of people, their concerns and requests. From these conversations, I try and find the best ways to respond to current needs and then anticipate future ones for pre-emptive action. A great gift in terms of the best part of my job – distilled to its essence – is when I have found out that I have had a positive impact on people and the community.

The most challenging aspects of my job...

...and the most rewarding parts of my job, are two different sides of the same coin – with the coin being people. People are amazing and they are also complex. During the strain of the pandemic, when we're not at our best, I've experienced that some folks will lash out in frustration and others will double-down in generosity. These responses can occur even when we're on the same team working toward the same goal, but we just have different opinions, priorities and methods. The collective challenge is to work on ourselves and our differences for the common good.

After work...

It's mostly a whirlwind of family activities until my son goes to bed. Picking up my son from school, taking him to soccer practice, eating dinner, reading together. Then, I'll try and clear any unanswered emails from my inbox and take care of the remaining daily tasks. And finally, a wind-down period with my partner of over 25 years.

I always wanted to be...

A generous human being who cares deeply about people. I work on this, day by day. I make mistakes. Our personal journeys are filled with tiny little choices whose integration results in a life trajectory. I hope my vector direction will always be forward.

Disclosures:

The opinions expressed in this feature are those of the interviewee/author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Nanomed Zone or Future Science Group.

Teri Odom has no financial or competing interests.

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