



DR. ROBERTA BONDAR

A HIGHER GROUND

By Cairine Caughill

For an ex-astronaut, Dr. Roberta Bondar is remarkably down to earth. It's easy to forget this woman has a B.Sc., M.Sc., M.D., Ph.D., more than two dozen honorary doctorates, the Order of Canada, and circled the globe in the space shuttle Discovery as the first Canadian woman and the first neurologist in space. She is also a sought-after public speaker and a respected photographer. Four schools now bear her name.

But she remains humble and charming, and makes other people comfortable around her — something that she learned from her mother, along with a positive attitude and enthusiasm for life. Dr. Bondar admires her mother's unwavering support. "She knew more about the struggles that women had... This is a woman who knew the value of education." And she was prepared to let her children fail so that they could learn. "It wasn't that we didn't make mistakes... It was the fact that we learned from our mistakes and still remained excited about life, and excited about learning."

Dr. Bondar refers to her work as an astronaut as "a personal triumph" and "the achievement of dreams." Dreams she'd had since her childhood in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario — unusual dreams for a young girl in the 1950s.

Many children, before and since, have dreamed of space travel, but very few of them realize that dream. Dr. Bondar thinks a combination of things made it happen for her. "One is certainly the skill set. And two is the opportunity. And three is the determination to follow through. You have to have the opportunity, you have to be

prepared, you have to be willing to sacrifice and do whatever it is that it takes — once the opportunity is there and you have the skill set. You can't just go there because you want to go there. These other things have to be in place."

As she made educational and career choices, Dr. Bondar never lost sight of her dream. "I always kept my eye on science and I always kept my eye on flying, and when I went into medicine, I saw the way of combining them all because of being able to do space medicine or aviation medicine. So that's what my focus was. I always knew they'd need doctors in space. And so I kept going."

When man landed on the moon in 1969, Dr. Bondar was 23. She saw this accomplishment as an opportunity to learn more about the moon, a frequent subject of her public school class projects. And she also saw it as confirmation that her childhood dreams could still become a reality for her.

The first shuttle landing took place when Dr. Bondar was doing her neurophthalmology fellowship at Tufts New England Medical School in Boston. "I remember being down in the eye clinic and making all these excuses that this patient really needed a bit more attention so I could be out in the waiting room watching the monitor. So, at that point, I realized that women were going to be in the program. How to access the American program was something that I wasn't quite sure how to do."

Dr. Bondar took what was, at the time, a non-traditional path by studying math and sciences, and learned at a young age that there would be barriers along

the way. In public school, she scored the highest mark on the crossing guard test but, because she was a girl, she wasn't allowed to be captain. That position went to a boy with a lower test score. She was made lieutenant.

In high school, the guidance counsellor tried to persuade her mother to tell her to take languages rather than science and math. Her mother refused.

She looks back on her challenges now and sees how they propelled her forward. "If I hadn't had barriers, I might be doing something completely

sports, so her focus shifted to science. Medicine followed quite naturally, and Dr. Bondar considers being a physician her greatest accomplishment.

Dr. Bondar cites as one of the best pieces of advice she's ever received, "Get hold of your emotions... There's a point in time when emotions are good. But there's a time when you have to check them at the door... Now, I don't mean being dispassionate all the time. I'm just talking about letting emotions interfere with judgement – impair judgement... In

"I'm much more confident now, and I know what barriers are important to me to go to battle against. When we're younger, at times, we're not quite sure which ones we should impale ourselves on and which ones we shouldn't."

Dr. Bondar's passions for education and photography led her to the Brooks Institute of Photography in Santa Barbara, California, where she earned an Honors Degree in Professional Nature Photography. Her work has been displayed in various galleries and published in several books. She plans to continue her writing and photography. "I like passing this knowledge on through books and my art."

Her definition of success is "doing what I intended doing, but doing it better than I could have thought I could." Right now, she's finding that success in her photography. She describes a particular photograph that she took – an 8 foot long print. "When I saw that, I thought, 'Now that's a photograph!'"

Dr. Bondar has learned the importance of having a support system – ideally, a diverse one. "No one person's going to be able to give you all the support you need in life, or one type of person." Bear in mind that these people won't always tell you what you want to hear. "If you're going to ask somebody, and you want an honest answer, you've got to be prepared for the answer."

Dr. Bondar's varied life experiences have taught her to "show people dignity and respect, because that's what we all want. And we should be able to understand it. How much effort does that take? And I think that's the bottom line I have for me – dignity and respect. When you have those things, everything else follows."

www.robertabondar.com

*Cairine Caughill is a freelance writer and editor living in Toronto.
CCaughill@EsteemMagazine.com*

"If you're going to ask somebody, and you want an honest answer, you've got to be prepared for the answer."

different. I might be someplace in society having a different role than I have now."

One of these possible roles might have been as a science and phys. ed. teacher. This was Dr. Bondar's goal when she was in high school. A case of the mumps and a paralyzed muscle in her third year of university changed her plans. She missed half a semester and had to stop playing

critical thinking, one tries to remove the emotional response to things... It's not appropriate."

Dr. Bondar looks back on some of the challenges she has faced and, with the wisdom that only comes with time, identifies certain ones she might have dealt with differently to obtain different results. And she has learned that we're not required to knock down every barrier we face.