

Challenging a young scientist to focus on patients ^[1]

People and Culture ^[2]

*At Novartis, we believe in gender equity. We continue to choose to challenge inequity, including through our **public pledge** ^[3] with the Equal Pay International Coalition (EPIC) to achieve gender balance in management and further improve our pay equity and transparency processes by 2023.*

This International Women's Day, we want to celebrate our progress while continuing to challenge ourselves and others to strive for meaningful change. We asked employees to recognize role models who have challenged and inspired them to become who they are today. Joana Silva, a principal scientist at the Novartis Institutes for BioMedical Research, shares her story.



Joana Silva was a visiting PhD student from 2009 to 2011 in the lab of Jackie F. Bromberg (shown here) at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC). Bromberg is currently a breast oncologist and professor at MSKCC and associate professor at Weill Cornell Medicine, where she supports and co-mentors scientists.

Jackie took me for a coffee the first day we met. It was 2009 and I was a visiting PhD student

in her lab in New York City at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. She said, “Update me on the latest data from your lab in Portugal.” After I shared it, she asked, “Yeah, but who cares about it?” And I was petrified. I didn’t know what to say.

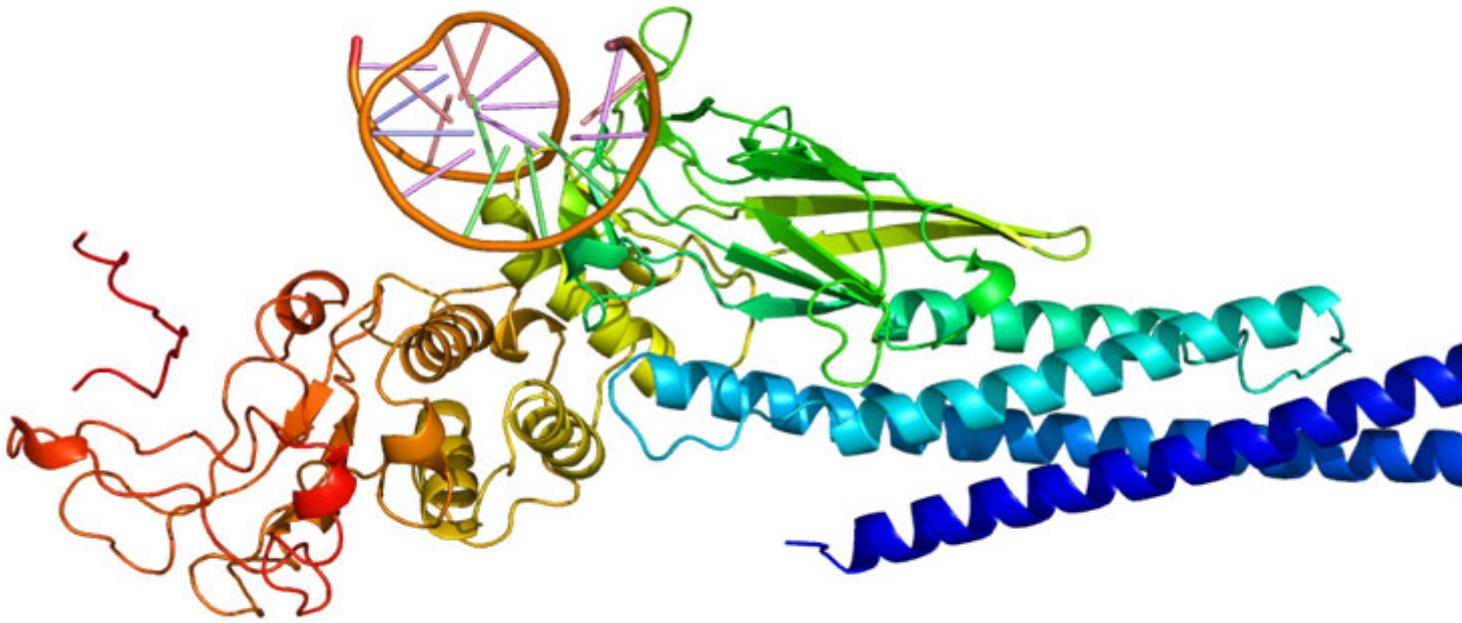
If I have to be honest, I hated the question. She put me on the spot. She was constantly challenging me to think about the relevance of my work. As an oncologist who also runs a lab, her mindset is all about translatability to patients. Up until that point, I had been growing up as a scientist amidst PhDs. All of a sudden an MD working with patients embedded me in her world, and it was a transformative experience.



Joana Silva’s experience in a lab in New York City was transformative.

It’s one of the reasons I ended up moving to a pharmaceutical company. I’m motivated to help patients. In my current role, I try to ask the types of questions that Jackie asked me. My team explores new drug targets for cancer. We’re also working on a new approach to treating cancer called radioligand therapy. It can take years for a project to translate into a potential therapy for patients, and many projects never reach that point, but scientists here are all focused on a common goal – to help patients.

Jackie could have felt threatened by my research. She’s widely respected in the oncology world for her work on a gene called Stat3. She’s the one who first described it as an oncogene, which means that it drives cancer. It was a discovery that she made as a postdoc. By the time I was a grad student, labs around the world had confirmed that Stat3 is a “bad guy” in a lot of cancer types. But I was working on thyroid cancer cells and found the opposite.



Joana Silva studied Stat3, a gene that produces a protein (here) shown to drive cancer. Her findings were surprising. Image by Emw/Wikimedia Commons

I was scared to share my data with Jackie, but she immediately jumped on board when she saw it. She believed the data and tried to find all sorts of ways to strengthen the results and build a story. She's a flexible thinker who truly follows the science.

Her enthusiasm for science is contagious. She goes the extra mile to help the scientists she mentors with their research. I started my project in Portugal in a lab with fewer resources. When I arrived at Memorial Sloan Kettering, Jackie quickly introduced me to anyone and everyone who might be able to help me, including researchers with useful tools and scientists working in translational research with access to clinical data. I immediately had a network even though I was only a visiting PhD student in her lab.

We have a word in Portuguese – 'desenrascado' – for people who are very good at moving worlds to quickly and efficiently solve a problem. It's in their nature to help others. My mother and grandmother are great examples of 'desenrascanço'. So is Jackie.

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Joana Silva

Her helpfulness extends beyond the lab. When I first arrived in New York, I found an apartment two blocks from work. At the time, Jackie was in the middle of an office move. When she heard that my place was unfurnished, she took me to her office and said, "Take all of this furniture." Then she went into the hall and recruited a passing scientist to help us

transport a table and couch on the spot. The three of us – including Jackie – carried the furniture to my apartment, a fifth-floor walkup.

I now lead a small lab, and, like Jackie, I believe in leading by example. I'm very close to my associates and try to be present for them. I put a lot of energy into spending time with my team and trying to help them understand the importance and relevance of what we do.

Main image of Joana Silva by Björn Myhre



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