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Failure didn't stop Dr. Richard Roberts. The Nobel laureate failed high-school physics before excelling at the subject and rising to scientific stardom as a genetics and molecular biology pioneer. Co-winner of the 1993 Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine for the discovery of split genes, Dr. Roberts shared his story with local middle and high school students gathered at Novartis Institutes for BioMedical Research (NIBR) in Cambridge, Mass., on May 21. The Community Alliances committee of NIBR's Cambridge Women's Resource Group sponsored the event in partnership with the Nobel Laureates School Visits Program.



Photo Source: Elaine Donohue Photography

The organizations hope to inspire passion for science in the next generation. According to the

U.S. Department of Education, a mere 16 percent of high school seniors are competent in mathematics and aim to pursue STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) careers. As an employer of biologists, chemists and other researchers around the world, NIBR aspires to convey their perspectives and passion.

Roberts's story could motivate students on the fence about pursuing STEM careers. After turning 16, school was boring and he bombed A-level physics. Yet he got the chemistry bug early in life with the support of his father, a mechanic, who outfitted his only son with a chemistry cabinet and chemicals from a local pharmacist.

"I soon discovered fireworks and other concoctions," Roberts, who grew up in Bath, UK, says in his Nobel Prize bio. "Luckily, I survived those years with no serious injuries or burns. I knew I had to be a chemist."

Roberts switched from organic chemistry to molecular biology during his postdoctoral days. In addition to showing that genes could be discontinuous—which led to the prediction of a new genetic process called splicing—through famous experiments at Cold Spring Harbor, he has had a successful career in the biotechnology industry as the chief scientific officer of reagents provider New England Biolabs since 1992.

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