Outstanding Cancer Biologist

In 1997 President Bill Clinton presented Biologist Jill Bargonetti the Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers, the highest governmental honor bestowed on scientists at the beginning of their research careers. Bargonetti was commended for her research on P53, a gene that helps suppress tumor cells, and her multicultural approach to teaching.

A native New Yorker, she is a member of the faculty of the doctoral program in Molecular, Cell, and Developmental Biology at the Graduate School of the City University of New York and Hunter College. She is also a member of the Center for Study of Gene Structure & Function at Hunter College, a Research Center supported by the Research Centers in Minority Institutions program of the National Center for Research Resources of the National Institutes of Health.

According to Bargonetti, people who have faulty P53 genes have cancer and her challenge is to discover how to fix the tumor-fighting gene and ultimately find a cure for cancer. The National Technical Association Inc. also recognized Bargonetti’s research and nominated her as one of 1999’s top 50 women in science, engineering and technology. In March 2001, Bargonetti was selected as one of eight recipients for the Annual Mayor’s Awards for Excellence in Science and Technology in which the city of New York honors its most accomplished scientists and engineers under the age of 40.

The daughter of an African American mother and Italian American father, Bargonetti attended Hunter College Elementary School, a special public school for gifted children. She says the school permitted students to learn in an open environment, encouraging them to pose questions instead of memorizing answers. She credits her science teachers at the Bronx High School of Science for making the courses so exciting that when she took a course in genetics it sparked her interest in scientific research. As a child, Bargonetti had her heart set on becoming a dancer and took both dance and science courses in college and graduated from SUNY Purchase in 1985 with a bachelors degree in dance. She was an accomplished dancer who has performed with “Sounds in Motion”, a Harlem-based company now disbanded. She opted for science however, and earned both her masters and doctorate at New York University in 1987 and 1990 respectively. She went to Columbia for her postdoctoral work from 1990 to 1994. For Bargonetti, the transition from dance to science was not difficult conceptually; she choreographed as a dancer, and as a scientist she creates her own ideas and designs experiments to test if they are true.
Bargonetti says that she chose to work on cancer research because she wanted to study something that was urgently needed by society. She doesn’t believe that anyone can live in these times without being interested in breast cancer and AIDS. Through her research Bargonetti has discovered the link between the P53 gene and the virus that causes AIDS. Even though her research is cutting edge she regrets that results in science do not come fast enough. She is at times frustrated to see so many people succumb to cancer and AIDS but this gives her further impetus to probe for answers.

In addition to her research Bargonetti is also committed to creating an environment in which students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds can work together. She is pleased that the award also recognizes her efforts to do so. Bargonetti regrets not having a single African American mentor when she did her graduate courses at New York University and her postdoctoral work at Columbia. She chose to teach at CUNY because of its high percentage of minority students. At Hunter, she wanted her laboratory represented by Ph.D. students from a variety of races to be a model for high–level science research. “My laboratory serves as a multicultural example to the undergraduate and graduate communities at Hunter College,” she says, citing the mix of Asian, Hispanic, and African-American students she teaches. "Role models are important components to helping talented scientists emerge from groups traditionally underrepresented in the sciences."

Dr Bargonetti-Chavarria is married to Nick Chavarria, a teacher in a Bronx public school and has two young children.