

## Dominic De Bellis: A Man of Many Hats

It's a bird! It's a plane! It's your friendly neighborhood science editor! Many people don't think of science editors as heroes, but Dominic De Bellis has been involved in volunteer firefighting and ambulance work for almost 14 years in addition to being a trained scientist and freelance medical writer and editor. According to De Bellis, the biggest similarity between science editing and firefighting is "you're always putting out fires—quickly".

"They're two very different things", he said. "But as a fire instructor I get involved in a lot of aspects of teaching. That is very much aligned with my medical writing. If I can communicate clearly via spoken words or on paper, or both, people will gain from that." For his last 3 years of work as a training officer, De Bellis received the 2003 Chief's Award from the Carmel (New York) Fire Department.

After earning a PhD in biochemistry and molecular biology in 1991 from New York Medical College (NYMC), De Bellis

returned to NYMC as a research assistant professor on a gene-based project in atherosclerosis. During that project, he spent much of his time in writing grant proposals. Through interaction with an editor assigned to work with faculty, he discovered that he enjoyed the craft of writing.

When De Bellis left the research world in 1994, he became a freelance writer and editor. In his first year, he edited 107 manuscripts. He has since established Dominic De Bellis Associates, Inc, a small company specializing in scientific and medical communications, in Carmel, New York—10 minutes from his home. De Bellis occasionally hires other freelancers for help on large projects. He is a member of several professional organizations, including CSE, which he joined in 1995.

"Alternative careers in science and medicine were not as well known" in 1994, he explained. "Given that, I joined the American Medical Writers Association [AMWA] and the Editorial Freelancers Association in New York City, and I went to a couple of meetings just to introduce myself and start networking; the whole thing started there." De Bellis will become president of AMWA at its annual meeting in October 2004.

While he was in school, De Bellis had various work-study jobs in biology and chemistry laboratories and worked in the fire department to help offset the costs of being a student. "This was not a lot of money", he said. "It was not a big thing as far as finances go, but it did help to keep my car running and all the things that college students have to deal with."

Growing up, De Bellis always considered it important to help others. That drive originally pushed him toward a career in medicine, so he volunteered with an ambulance team to get some experience. "It was fortunate that I did that, because I recognized that although I enjoyed that aspect of medical care, I'm probably not well suited to be a physician, because I got involved with the patients emotionally", he said.

De Bellis says his experience in emergency medicine gives him a slight advantage in his writing by allowing him to "wear those different hats mentally as I'm approaching a project". Despite that experience, he

said he has never written about firefighting or emergency medical work. "People have asked me to do that", he said, "but I felt it wasn't the right time or project".

In addition to volunteer firefighter and full-time writer and editor, De Bellis is a professional musician. He plays the piano and other keyboard instruments, but primarily he is a bass player. "I play both the string bass and bass guitar", he said. "The string bass is like a giant cello, it stands about 6 feet—only don't call it a cello. It is quite different. You'll upset a lot of musicians if you call it that."

Instead of being in a band or orchestra, De Bellis is a musician for hire. "The way it goes is that a music director or someone who's putting together a production will . . . contract with people to play the woodwinds, people to play the rhythm section, [and so on]. It's expected that you be able to hold your own, read well, play properly, and understand all the things around you as a musician."

A self-proclaimed gadget nut, De Bellis also writes a quarterly column on engineering and technical careers for *Workforce Diversity for Engineering and IT Professionals* magazine. "I love how things work", he said. "I'm pretty interested in computers and I've kept up to date with a lot of things in that field. But for the most part, everything I work on is science- and medicine-related."

Being a freelance generally gives De Bellis flexibility in his schedule to pursue his passions. At times, though, a pressing deadline makes a writing or editing project take priority. "Sometimes I cannot respond to emergency calls", he explained, "and my chief understands this. Because this is a volunteer department, we need to put family and work first."

Usually, however, he manages to juggle his various hats. "Being exhausted from fighting a fire is difficult, for sure", he explained, "but a good night's sleep usually refreshes me and gets me back into my writing work. The physical exertion is an excellent balance for the calm and sedentary aspects of writing. And it feels good to be able to help people in the community."

JOSHUA HARRIS prepared this profile while a Science Editor intern.