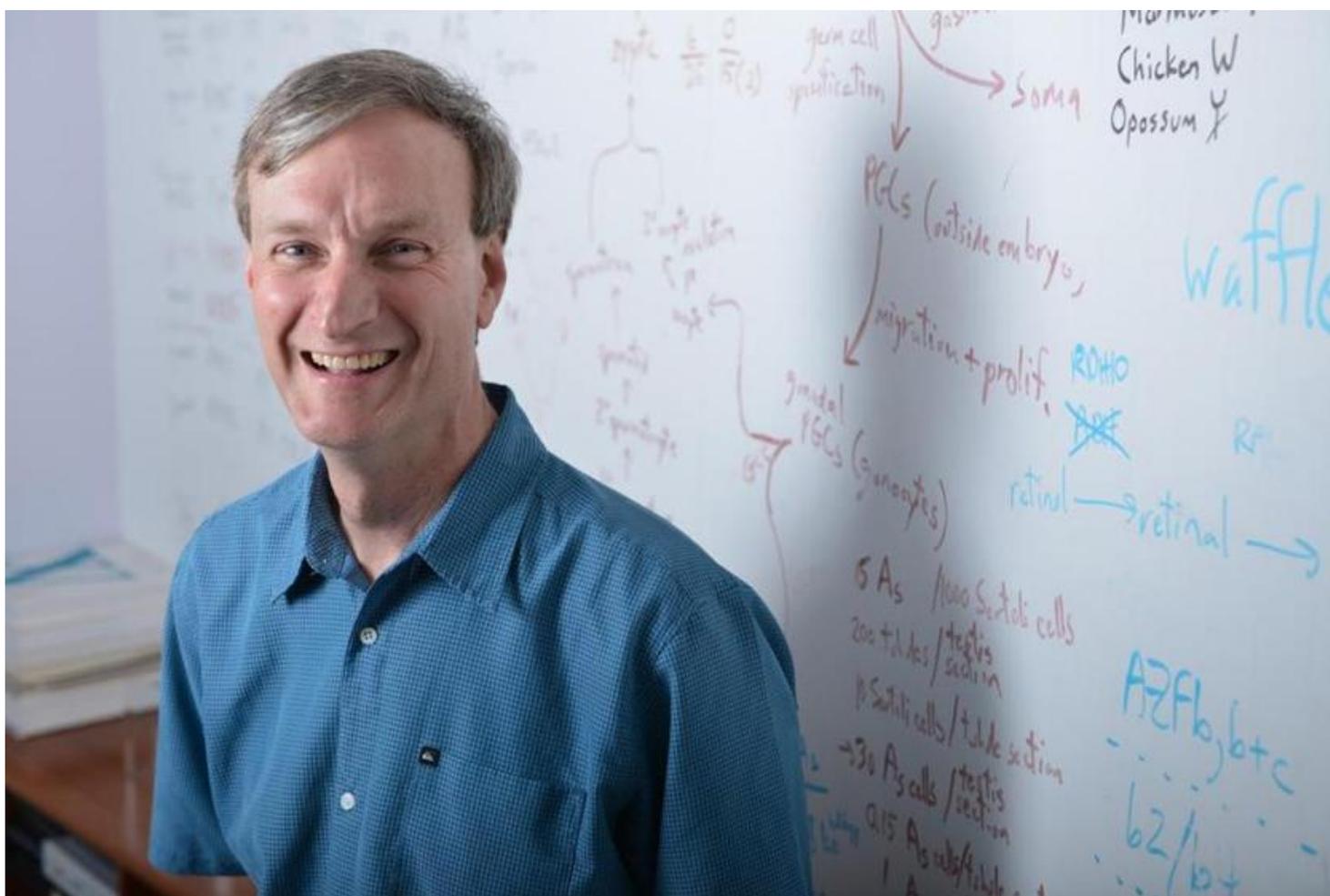


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Business

Seven things you should know about Dr. David C. Page

Director of the Whitehead Institute



JOSH REYNOLDS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Dr. David C. Page graduated from Harvard Medical School and has spent his career in research.

By Priyanka Dayal McCluskey | GLOBE STAFF AUGUST 31, 2014

Dr. David C. Page, 58, joined the Whitehead Institute in Cambridge 30 years ago and never left. He has led the biomedical research center since 2004, overseeing nearly 600 people, from undergraduates to professors, across 21 laboratories. Page graduated from Harvard Medical School and has spent his career in research. The subject of his work is the Y chromosome. He is obsessed with what — genetically — makes men and women so different. Page chatted recently with Globe reporter Priyanka Dayal McCluskey. Here's what she found out:

1Page was raised far from the towering research centers of Boston — in Amish country, in rural Pennsylvania. He didn't know he would become a scientist. But thinking back to his childhood, he remembers getting a couple of relevant Christmas presents: a chemistry kit one year, a microscope another.

“When I was growing up, I had no idea what a scientist does because I'd never met one,” he said. “I was the first person in my family to go to college.”

2Page was the first student assigned to work on what would later be called the Human Genome Project. He was on a mission to map the whole genome, but eventually focused on the genetic material known as sex chromosomes. That assignment helped define his career.

“What I'm working on today I can trace in an unbroken line back to things that I started on in the summer of 1979. It's just unbelievable to me. I have a large appreciation for the role of chance. I feel like everything in my life I've sort of fallen into.”

3Page wants us to stop ignoring differences between men and women. By identifying the genetic variations between men and women, scientists may better understand what

causes diseases and why some occur more commonly in one sex than another. Rheumatoid arthritis, for example, hits women more often than men. Autism spectrum disorders occur more commonly in males.

“Perhaps the disease is actually a different disease in males and females. Maybe the causes of disease differ fundamentally between males and females. At the end of the day, the goal will be to tailor therapies to males and females. I would like to arrive eventually at that question.”

4Page defended the Y chromosome to comedian and satirist Stephen Colbert. In 2012, he took the hot seat on “The Colbert Report,” the popular Comedy Central show, to counter reports that the Y chromosome — and therefore, men — may be at risk of extinction. Page prepared for the interview by watching hours of Colbert footage and practicing with his props, some plastic tubes, and a hair scrunchie.

“There is fun, relaxing, and fun, intense. This was fun, intense.”

5The Whitehead Institute has spun off many biotech companies over the years, but that’s not the only way Page measures its success. He wants Whitehead researchers to be wildly curious and ask big questions about basic science, like how cells work, and how genes are linked to disease.

“This is not a top-down organization. I consider this place to be sort of a chaotically creative artist colony.”

6Page met his wife at a hospital in Liberia, where they both worked as medical students. The hospital was severely short-staffed, Page discovered upon arriving.

“They said ‘Do you think you could run the emergency room tomorrow night?’ I said

‘I don’t speak the language, I don’t know much about tropical disease, but sure.’”

7Somewhere in his house is a baritone horn. Page used to be a union musician, playing in a band in front of tourists in Pennsylvania. He also worked at a dining hall serving Cambodian refugees to the United States, among other odd jobs in the past.

“I played in a strolling band in Hershey park amusement park in Hershey, Pa. I still have my baritone horn. There’s some threat that I’ll get it back out.”

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