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Donny Strosberg gave up fame in France to join Scripps to help find cures for diseases in South Florida



By **DAVID ROGERS**
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Challenges can make people crumble and surrender or spur them to fight harder to succeed.

Donny Strosberg, a biochemist at The Scripps Research Institute's Florida campus in Jupiter, falls into the later category.

A professor in the department of infectology, Strosberg has experienced his share of challenges — what he calls head winds — but those obstacles have not been able to dampen the hearty enthusiasm he has for his research, his family and life.



Daily News Photo by Lee Hershfield
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Challenges and obstacles are valuable 'because that's what forges character,' said Dr. Donny Strosberg, shown in his Jupiter office. 'It also forces you to select what is really important and what is secondary.'

Strosberg and his wife, Eliane, moved to Palm Beach from Paris in 2005 after he accepted an offer from Scripps that allowed him to change the focus of his research. In France, Strosberg had been CEO of Hybrigenics, a privately held biotech firm he co-founded with the Pasteur Institute. The firm studies ubiquitous proteases — a group of enzymes that tag excessive or injured proteins for degradation — in order to develop cures for cancer and other diseases. He has conducted research on Legionnaire's disease and AIDS, as well as obesity.

His latest research challenge

At Scripps, Strosberg is studying the interaction of cellular proteins as a way to find a treatment for Hepatitis C.



Daily News Photo by Lee Hershfield
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At the Scripps Research Institute's Florida campus in Jupiter, Donny Strosberg is studying the interaction of cellular proteins as a way to find a treatment for Hepatitis C.

Occupation: Researcher, professor of immunology at Scripps Florida.

"When they asked me to join Scripps. They asked me what is the most difficult (problem) that you look at and that you think you could solve. So I said, I'd like to inhibit protein-protein interactions, which everybody said would never work," said the 64-year-old scientist. Having published more than 360 research papers in his long career, Strosberg was not under pressure to immediately publish results for the nonprofit biotechnology giant. He did, however, have to apply for National Institutes of Health grants right away. "They forgot to tell me that," he said with a laugh.

Favorite quote: 'It's the early bird that catches the worm.'

About 130 million people worldwide have Hepatitis C, including 3 million in America, where 40,000 new cases are diagnosed each year, according to Strosberg. Doctors currently treat Hepatitis C by giving patients a combination of interferon and ribavirin. That treatment, however, has significant side effects, including anemia, and, it eliminates the virus in only half of the Hepatitis C cases worldwide. The figure drops to as few as 20 percent of patients in the Western world. "That's the bad news. The not-so-bad news is you don't get sick right away," Strosberg said.

Most admired people: 'My wife, Eliane; my daughter, Muriel; my son, Sorge; my grandson, Joshua.'

Favorite movie: 'Awakenings,' a movie inspired by the book of the same name of Dr. Oliver Sacks, on his patients who were apparently the catatonic victims of an encephalitis epidemic many years previously. And of which a doctor played by Robin Williams tries to treat with a new drug. What left a lasting impression on me is the incredibly optimistic and persistent attitude of the physician.'

The blood-borne virus, for which there is no vaccine, can stay in the body for decades before destroying the liver.

"First it gets permanently inflamed. You get liver cirrhosis and you can get liver carcinoma. Luckily not everybody who's a carrier

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becomes sick. It's maybe 20 percent. But that's still a high number and it's the major cause for liver dysfunction in the United States and the major cause of liver transplantation."

The virus can worsen the health of people with other diseases such as AIDS, as a compromised liver is unable to detoxify medications as well as a healthy one.

"If the liver doesn't work, these drugs can be much more toxic," Strosberg said.

Strosberg said he relishes the opportunity to work on a project that could have enormous impact on the world even if it means he went from fame in France to relative obscurity in America.

"When I left France I was a CEO of a company for which I had raised \$60 million," he said. Because of the company's progress in drug development, it had millions of dollars in income. "I was sort of a little king," he adds, smiling. And he was a respected professor at the University of Paris. "I decided to come here and here I was nothing," he jokes. "I had to start from scratch."

That involved getting a work visa, finding a cozy home at the Sun & Surf condominium and building a laboratory staff.

One day, his decision to come to Scripps Florida will pay off, via a drug-development partnership with Pfizer, he said. "This is really going to be something," Strosberg said.

While at Scripps, Strosberg has become a mentor and friend to Nagi Ayad, an assistant professor working to understand how cellular proteins impact the growth of brain cancer in children. "He's, of course, very careful, very thoughtful but also very open-minded and new to ideas and innovations," Ayad said of Strosberg. "... he's very open to new ideas, even from young scientists like myself." Strosberg has tried to help a number of young people start businesses, Ayad said.

"He cares about people. I've never seen him not try to help somebody," Ayad said.

'Head winds' forge your character

While his work at Scripps is an enjoyable challenge, Strosberg has faced his share of head winds.

For one, his enthusiasm has not always been viewed as a positive.

Strosberg said he is not a political creature, and at times that has hampered his progress in his accomplished career. "That's probably one of my weakest points," he said, though he shows no desire to play politics.

"Sometimes you are too impulsive or people think you are too impulsive, and people want to slow you down," Strosberg said. "How do you slow people down? There are many possible ways," the scientist said. "Things didn't always work out as they should have. Promotions didn't always come when they were deserved."

One of the largest headwinds he faced was losing many family members to the Holocaust. He was born in 1945 in a refuge camp near Montreaux, Switzerland. During World War II, Strosberg's father, Joel Wolf Strosberg, a Belgian, was imprisoned in the Drancy camp in Paris, but escaped before he could be deported to a concentration camp. His mother, Julia Hendrica Lopes Cardozo, originally of the Netherlands, fled from Belgium to Switzerland with Strosberg's older brother.

"She was one of the 25,000 Jews accepted by the Swiss," he recalls. After the war, he moved with his parents to their home in Antwerp, Belgium. "Nearly half of the family was massacred by the Nazis. I never knew any of my grandparents," he said.

The tragedy taught Strosberg important lessons.

"Everything else can disappear from one day to the other — honors, money, all of that doesn't count. What counts is how happy are you in your head and what do you achieve thanks to your brain," he said, sounding very much like a scientist. He also learned to take pride in his heritage.

"As Jews, we were persecuted. Independently of whether we were bad or good, we were persecuted. That is something I have to live with. I was born with it. I might as well be proud of it," he said.

Discrimination is not entirely a thing of the past. While living in Paris, Strosberg founded an organization to research European obesity. The international organization's charter had to be ratified by the various countries in the European Union, he recalls. It hit a stumbling block.

"At the end, the only country that didn't want to sign was France. The representative of France didn't like my name. My name didn't sound French enough and even though I had organized the whole thing, this representative didn't want to sign it," he said. Other organizers backed Strosberg and the French representative relented.

Challenges and obstacles are valuable, Strosberg said.

"Because that's what forges character. It also forces you to select what is really important and what is



Photo Courtesy of Donny Strosberg

[\(enlarge photo\)](#)

Donny Strosberg and Eliane are shown in an undated photograph.

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secondary," he said.

Strosberg said he lets his work speak for itself. "So the headwinds are the normal headwinds. It's a price to pay but I will not give up my enthusiasm and my fun simply to obtain something quicker."

In his spare time, Strosberg enjoys swimming; playing with his grandson, Joshua; and pruning bonsai trees.

He's also working to lessen his tendency to be a "little bit righteous." That characteristic compels him to yell at bad drivers, no matter where he is. During a trip to China, he launched a tirade against someone driving poorly. Eliane was ready with a quick reply. "My wife would say there are 1 billion [to] 200 million Chinese. Are you going to educate all of them?"

People talking on mobile phones while driving make him crazy, he acknowledges.

"I should probably say live and let live," he said, laughing.

Talk of the Town

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