

Irina Marinov

Assistant Professor, Department of Earth and Environmental Science, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA, imarinov@sas.upenn.edu

After graduating from the old and prestigious Saint Sava high school in Bucharest, Romania, I came to the United States as an international student. I completed my BA in physics and mathematics at Middlebury College and my PhD in atmospheric and ocean sciences at Princeton University.

Following my 2005 graduation, I spent four years as a postdoctoral researcher at MIT and at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution. My career was most challenging during those years, partly because of the uncertainties associated with such temporary positions and the challenges of a three-year, long-distance relationship. I remember endless sleepless nights pondering the same questions again and again. Will I ever find a job in the same place with my partner? Will this relationship survive the distance? Am I good enough to ever get a faculty job? Should I quit the academic track to have a normal life? Will I ever have a child?

In 2009, after an intense job search, the difficulty of finding two tenure-track positions in the same university in different fields (oceanography and theoretical physics) became very clear. We found the best temporary solution at the University of Pennsylvania (Penn). My husband came in as an assistant professor in the Department of Physics and Astronomy, while I was offered a (non-tenure-track) lecturer position

in Earth and Environmental Sciences—a small interdisciplinary department with no other oceanographers. After three years as a lecturer, and another intense job search (and almost leaving for another academic job), I was offered an assistant professorship at Penn.

Life sometimes works out in unexpected ways. Despite the convoluted path I took to get and stay here, Penn turned out, somewhat unexpectedly, to be a good place for me. My colleagues are supportive, and because we are in such widely different fields, I do not feel internal competition or stress. I lead a small research group in oceanography, and we have great fun doing research. We run and analyze global climate models to predict future changes in climate, with a focus on the role of the ocean in global heat and carbon cycles and on global ocean ecology. My undergraduate students are brilliant, and I can teach and research whatever I want. I feel lucky every day to do research and teach in a field (climate science) that is important societally, and I hope to teach my students how to become better stewards of our planet in this process.

I have found myself thriving and happier as a scientist as I have become more and more independent scientifically, and also after having a child and enjoying a stable family life. I have a supportive family and husband, and a five-year-old son, who brings joy and excitement to my life every day. I am much happier now as a faculty member. Gradually, my anxieties related to the “impostor syndrome,” which plagued me for all my student and postdoc years, subsided, and I understood that science is much more fun if you simply do not worry about what others think of you. To budding scientists, I would say: be persistent. Persistence trumps anything else in science. If you want a child, have one. A balanced family life will give you stability and happiness, and will help you be a better scientist. And finally, search for supportive mentors and ask for their help. I would have never made it so far if it were not for those caring mentors and advisors along the way who not only taught me science but also told me “yes, you can” when I was riddled with anxieties. I will always be indebted to them.



Irina on the West Antarctic Peninsula, February 2014.