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## Profiles in Women's History

Nancy Wexler

When she was a kid, Nancy Wexler, 57, never thought she would become a scientist. She liked her science classes but thought math was too hard. Fortunately, her parents, both scientists, helped her. Today, Wexler is a professor of psychology at Columbia University in New York. Her award-winning work helps doctors understand how brain diseases that run in families are passed on from generation to generation.

When Wexler was 21, she got the bad news that her mother was dying from a brain disorder called Huntington's disease. Doctors didn't know its cause or cure. Even worse, they knew the disease runs in families.

That meant there was a chance Wexler and her sister Alice could develop it too.

Wexler decided to hunt for the cause of Huntington's, hoping to someday find a cure. In 1972, she learned of villages in Venezuela where almost every family suffered from the disease. She decided to travel there to study the people. Many scientists did not think she would find anything useful. "They treated me like a little girl who didn't know what she was talking about," Wexler says.

But she was convinced that by studying many families with Huntington's, scientists would find a gene--a tiny piece of DNA--that causes the disease. She was right. In 1993, a group of researchers used the information Wexler's group had gathered in Venezuela to identify the exact location of the Huntington's gene. They used some new DNA techniques for the first time.

Now, Wexler is helping researchers find a cure for Huntington's. "We shouldn't sit around and say, 'This is impossible,'" she says. "We should say, 'It's possible,' and figure out how to do it."

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### She Led the Way

Long before Nancy Wexler was born, a young female scientist was laying the groundwork for the study of how genes are inherited. Barbara McClintock began studying genetics as a 19-year-old student at Cornell University in 1921. Her work with corn plants showed the surprising ways that genes can move from one generation to the next.

In 1983, McClintock became the first American woman to receive an individual Nobel Prize. Her work is still relevant today.

-By Alice Park