SPOTLIGHT: THE UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

What is your current position and how did you get to where you are?

My name is **Forrest D. Heller**. I am a chemist and I got here by instilling an abiding interest in chemistry in general and radiochemistry in particular.

What made you decide to do research as an undergraduate student?

I decided to do research as an undergrad to start working at the company that I had wanted to work for since high school.

How did undergraduate research affect your career direction or play a role in your career choice?

After completing my first two years of college I was still set on becoming a chemist, but my particular field of interest was still wide open. During my third year of undergrad, I had the opportunity to intern at Pacific Northwest National Laboratory (PNNL), which is a couple of miles up the road from campus where I was enrolled. During this internship, I had the opportunity to work in a real radiochemistry lab. Having grown up near PNNL, I knew that the field of radiochemistry existed; however, I didn't know enough about it to choose it as a field of interest. My time working at PNNL and doing research (nuclear forensics) showed me the interesting opportunities that exist in the field. I was only able to do this internship for a year before having to move campuses to finish my bachelor's degree; however, this experience inspired me to get involved in the radiochemistry department at Washington State University (WSU) as a graduate student. I would end up going back to PNNL to conduct my thesis work (radiochemistry field), which in turn led me to stay on full time at PNNL after completing graduate school.

Any final thoughts?

I would encourage anyone considering doing research as an undergraduate to go ahead and do it. You can potentially get into a specific field of your studies that you either weren't aware of or wouldn't normally consider. When you are doing just classroom work, your field of study can feel so large and uncertain that it is hard to focus on any particular subfield.