

Margie Profet: A Promising Scientist Vanishes Without a Trace

By WeeklyScientist

Dated: Jul 01, 2009

Four years ago, renowned evolutionary biologist Margie Profet vanished without a trace. Here, for the first time, is the final chapter of her celebrated life.

The most striking thing about biologist Margie Profet used to be her unconventional theories about evolution and pregnancy, conceived as she surfed the perilous waters of academe with neither tenure track nor PhD.

Now, more than 15 years after she made headlines as a young scientific “It Girl,” the most striking thing about Profet is how her life suddenly stopped. One day she was at Harvard University and the next day she wasn't. The prodigal prodigy vanished into thin air, disappeared without a trace.

What happened to this anti-establishment thinker whose Sheryl Crow looks and beautiful mind made her a media darling? Weekly Scientist tackles that question in an exclusive in-depth report, "Margie Profet's Unfinished Symphony."

Almost single-handedly recasting a trio of everyday curses into a trinity of evolutionary blessings, Profet argued that menstruation, morning sickness, and allergies are highly-adaptive protective mechanisms. In a series of notable papers for the Quarterly Review of Biology, she did what the best scientists do—overturn the conventional wisdom with insightful thinking and rigorous defense.

In two popular but controversial books, 1995's "Protecting Your Baby-To-Be" and a 1997 sequel, "Pregnancy Sickness: Using Your Body's Natural Defenses to Protect Your Baby-To-Be," Profet warned pregnant women to avoid certain vegetables like cauliflower and Brussels sprouts because they contain traces of a carcinogen.

After Profet won a MacArthur Foundation “genius” grant in 1993, Scientific American, The New York Times, and even Time Magazine swooned. People Magazine featured her in the Shannen Doherty “secret wedding” issue. Elle covered her in a “Good Hair Day” edition. Harper's Bazaar asked if she needed the magazine's hair and make-up artists for a photo shoot.

Google Profet's name today and you'll see thousands of entries, debates, conversations, and news, all but ending a few years ago. Unmarried, fit and healthy, no reports of ill health or death have ever surfaced. No out-of-sorts boyfriends or obsessive stalkers. No dangerous pursuits, at least not involving life and limb.

Featuring over a dozen interviews with the friends, co-workers, and colleagues who knew her best, "Margie Profet's Unfinished Symphony" chronicles Profet's celebrated life, from her meteoric rise in scientific and media circles to the days just before she disappeared.

Laying waste to various myths about her enigmatic persona, the story reveals that Profet was not the maverick she was portrayed to be. Word of her disappearance has brought forth praise, bewilderment, and sorrow from the very establishment she purportedly shunned. Margie Profet had powerful mentors who shaped and shepherded much of her work, and cared deeply about her life and well-being.

“Very sad,” said U.C. Berkeley biochemist Bruce Ames, who worked closely with Profet on some of her groundbreaking research.

“We tried desperately to find Margie a few years ago, but came up empty handed,” Ames’ executive assistant Teresa Klask said from the Children’s Hospital Oakland Research Institute, where Ames maintains a lab.

“Shocked and saddened to hear that Profet had disappeared and might even be dead,” Donald Brown, who taught anthropology at UC Santa Barbara, got to know Profet when she stayed with his friend and colleague, UC Santa Barbara evolutionary anthropologist Donald Symons. Famous for his theory of “human universals,” which posits that certain behavioral traits are common to all human beings regardless their culture or ethnicity, Brown remembers Profet as “attractive, bright, and a little eccentric, but unfailingly pleasant and upbeat.”

He was also a fan of her work. “It seemed an insightful, well-thought-out, and very useful application of evolution,” he said.

Don Symons -- considered one of the founders of evolutionary psychology -- echoed his friend Donald Brown. “I was honored to have helped Margie shape her ideas,” Symons explained. “No one has more respect and admiration for her amazingly creative intellect than I do.”

And few people had more insight into Margie Profet the person -- and why she vanished, so suddenly and completely.

To find out more about the life and disappearance of Margie Profet, please read the entire story at:

Margie Profet's Unfinished Symphony
A Promising Scientist Vanishes Without a Trace
<http://www.weeklyscientist.com>

Alternative link:
<http://weeklyscientist.blogspot.com>

###

Collected stories from science and technology journalist Mike Martin for some of the world's leading publications.

Category	Science, Research, Society
Tags	margie profet, biologist, biology, evolution, darwin, menstruation, harvard, berkeley
Email	Click to email author
Country	United States