

A **MATRIX** Minute with May Beamer



About May

May Beamer was born and raised in Maui after her parents and three brothers immigrated to Hawaii from the Philippines in 1968. She earned a dual bachelor's degree in Biochemistry and Microbiology from the [University of Washington in Seattle](#). It was here that she met MATRIX Executive Director, Dr. Sharon Hillier, who was one of her professors at the time. As an undergraduate, she worked part-time in an HPV research lab. Anticipating her graduation in December of 1992, she applied for full-time research positions. Although the position in the Hillier Lab was already filled, she was interviewed and hired to identify vaginal *Lactobacillus* using genomic methods, which led to her first publication.

In 1996 she moved with the Hillier lab to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where they continued to conduct safety studies of vaginal microbiota and product use (tampons, spermicides, treatments for bacterial vaginosis). In 2013, she was trained on [MTN-023](#) as a [Microbicide Trials Network](#) - Laboratory Center representative. Thereafter, she primarily worked on phase 1 pharmacokinetic vaginal ring studies only done in the US. Her technical experiences in the processing lab also prepared her to oversee the operations of laboratory activities in MATRIX protocols. She has been managing the Hillier Lab for the past seven years.

What sparked your interest in the field of laboratory science?

In a way, I sort of fell into this field of work – when I was growing up, I always got straight A's in school. This led to my parents telling their friends that I was going to work in the medical field, and that goal stayed in my head all throughout high school. When I went to college, some of the courses I took influenced me to begin focusing more on biology studies. The course that steered me specifically towards microbiology was my Medical Microbiology lab, as this was the first time that I was introduced to visualizing bacteria through a microscope and growth on an agar plate.

What do you like about working in a laboratory setting?

One of the things I enjoy about working in lab research is the troubleshooting aspect of it. There are often different kinds of challenges and twists, and finding out a way to work through them always keeps things exciting! In addition to the troubleshooting nature that comes with this field of work, I also enjoy having the opportunity to work alongside all my colleagues in the lab.

What advice would you give to someone who is considering a career in Laboratory work/research?

When you're just getting started in lab work, don't just do a procedure, learn the purpose of the procedure and the purpose of each step in the procedure. For example, understand why you would need to use a certain enzyme, buffer or chemical. Knowing this may help you troubleshoot various kinds of issues that you could run into down the line. Also, and this goes for any career path, don't just sit down and play on your phone when you're done with a project or assignment, show initiative! Ask questions - learn about controls, quality control/quality assurance- not too many people know about that. These actions will help you get ahead.

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What career path might you have chosen if you hadn't gone into laboratory science?

While I'm not entirely sure, I do know that I would not go back to working in answering services - every now and then we would get individuals that would leave unpleasant messages for the physicians in the office where I used to work. I have however previously considered both bartending and information technology. I may have even been happy doing renovations with my brother back in Maui.

What is your favorite memory from MATRIX?

My favorite memory during my time with MATRIX so far is getting to meet and work with everyone during the Lab Breakout session during the Investigators Meeting in Nairobi this year. There has been a lot of emails going back and forth between last year's Investigators Meeting and this year's due to more studies being activated, and getting to actually meet all the people that we've only known through email and video calls in person was a refreshing experience. This also applies to everyone on the clinical team as well!

Do you have anyone who inspires you?

Two people who were huge inspirations to me throughout my life were my parents. My father was a surveyor for a construction company, and my mother worked in housekeeping at the Royal Lahina Hotel. The fact that they were able to move here and worked so hard to give my siblings and I the chance to get an education and so many other great opportunities means so much to me, and as they were getting older it became more evident how hard they worked for us to have a good life.

What is a fun fact about you?

A fun fact about me is that I enjoy the outdoors and going on little adventures, such as going on road trips, going for a walk on a nature trail, like in Haleakala crater on Maui – one of the quietest places on earth, and, on one occasion, even skydiving. During a hike at Kakadu National Park in Australia, a leech attached itself to my leg. Additionally, I love old western style movies, like the ones with Clint Eastwood and more recent ones like 'Once upon a time in Mexico' and 'Django Unchained'. Another favorite of mine is 'Tombstone' - Val Kilmer was to die for as Doc Holliday.

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