Influential Women Distinguishes Shea Elizabeth O'Connor: The Curious Mind Behind Discovery, Purpose, And Impact

BLOOMFIELD, CO, UNITED STATES, September 3, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Research Scientist and Microbiologist Advancing Scientific Discovery and Consumer Safety Through Curiosity, Mentorship, Continuous Learning, Community and Meaningful Impact



Bloomfield, Colorado – Shea Elizabeth O'Connor is a dedicated research scientist and microbiologist whose career reflects a lifelong passion for healthcare, scientific discovery, and work that can make a meaningful difference in people's lives. Her professional journey has not followed a conventional path. Beginning in healthcare as a Certified Nursing Assistant at just 16 years old, she spent nearly a decade working with patients and gaining first hand insight into the importance of protecting human health. Over time, however, her natural curiosity and love of learning led her in a different direction—toward scientific research.

Today, Shea serves as a Staff Scientist at RFI Ingredients, where she applies her expertise in analytical chemistry and microbiology to the testing of botanical and dietary supplement ingredients. Her work includes verifying ingredient identity, measuring compounds such as vitamins and caffeine, and screening materials for harmful contaminants, including pathogens and bacterial contamination. Through this work, she contributes to ensuring that products are accurately represented, meet appropriate quality expectations, and are safe and trustworthy for consumers.

Her current role builds upon a research career that began at the University of Missouri–Kansas City (UMKC) around 2020 and has since taken her through cancer research, proteomics, protein-

ligand analysis, and emerging applications of artificial intelligence in science. Throughout her journey, Shea has been guided by a simple but meaningful question: What can happen when curiosity, scientific discovery, and a desire to make a difference come together?

A Career Shaped by Curiosity and an Unconventional Beginning
Shea's path into scientific research was shaped by years of exploration. While attending UMKC, she initially pursued a degree in biology while considering several healthcare-related career possibilities, including medical school, physician assistant programs, and dental school. She had already developed a strong connection to healthcare through her years as a CNA, but she had not yet determined where her long-term interests would lead.

Her academic path began to unfold when a chemistry teacher, who would later become an important advisor and mentor, helped her navigate her coursework and see new possibilities in the sciences. With her guidance, Shea pursued degrees in both biology and chemistry, laying the foundation for a career that would ultimately bring her curiosity, analytical thinking, and passion for discovery together.

A particularly influential turning point came through one of her professors. After taking his class, Shea frequently stayed after lectures to speak with him and learn more about his experiences. He recognized potential in her before she fully recognized it in herself and encouraged her to consider research as a career path.One of the most important lessons he shared was that it is never too late to begin something new. His own career journey demonstrated that success does not necessarily follow a predetermined timeline, and his example challenged Shea to think differently about what was possible for her.

He encouraged her to explore research, helping her recognize strengths and interests that had not yet fully developed. His patience and confidence in her abilities ultimately helped lead Shea into research at UMKC around 2020. She remains deeply grateful for the influence of both this mentor and the Lead Principal Investigator who supported her development.

Before entering research, Shea's nearly decade-long experience in healthcare had already taught her the importance of serving others. She worked as a CNA in a variety of settings and developed a deep appreciation for patient care. She also spent time in nursing school, but eventually recognized that the part of healthcare that most energized her was not necessarily direct patient care. It was the opportunity to ask questions, solve problems, understand how things work, and explore new possibilities.

Research offered a way to combine those interests. It allowed Shea to remain connected to work that could improve people's lives while giving her the intellectual freedom to pursue scientific questions and continually develop her knowledge.Her curiosity was evident even earlier. At 16, alongside beginning her healthcare career, she also worked as a garden assistant at a plant shop. That experience reflected an interest in learning across disciplines that has remained with her throughout her life.

From Cancer Research to Food Safety and Quality

During her time at UMKC, Shea discovered how much she enjoyed research and began developing the technical and analytical skills that would become the foundation of her professional career. Following graduation in 2022 with degrees in biology and chemistry, she continued building her scientific expertise as an R&D researcher at the University of Colorado Boulder.

Her work there focused on cancer research, including protein-ligand complexes and proteomics. She also gained experience with analytical chemistry and chemical interaction analysis, giving her exposure to an increasingly important intersection between biology, chemistry, computational tools, and emerging technology.

That experience also changed the way Shea viewed scientific discovery. Rather than seeing biology, chemistry, and technology as separate fields, she began to appreciate the possibilities that emerge when they intersect. She became drawn to the spaces between disciplines—places where different perspectives come together, new questions emerge, and unexpected discoveries become possible.

Today, her role at RFI Ingredients allows her to apply that multidisciplinary foundation in a field with direct implications for consumers. Through analytical chemistry and microbiological testing, she helps evaluate botanical, food, and dietary supplement ingredients and identify potential risk concerns related to identity, composition, contamination, and stability.

For Shea, there is a strong sense of purpose in that responsibility. Food safety and quality are not simply technical requirements; they are connected to public trust. Consumers should be able to have confidence in the products they purchase and use, and Shea values being part of the scientific work that helps support that confidence.

The Power of Mentorship and Community

Mentorship has remained one of the strongest themes throughout Shea's career. Her early research mentor was instrumental in helping her recognize possibilities beyond the path she originally imagined. At UMKC, she also participated in the PALS peer mentoring program, both as a mentor and as someone being mentored.

The experience changed the way She thinks about communication, relationships, teamwork, and personal development. It reinforced her belief that people rarely succeed entirely on their own and that communities built around encouragement and shared knowledge can have a lasting impact.

The woman who led the PALS program became an important role model for Shea, demonstrating the value of patience, compassion, leadership, and commitment to helping others believe in themselves.

Those experiences continue to influence the way Shea approaches professional relationships. She believes mentorship should not be viewed as a one-way exchange. Learning can happen between people at different stages of their careers, and everyone has something to contribute.

Shea has also been fortunate to work alongside talented colleagues and leaders throughout her career. Her current workplace has provided opportunities to strengthen her scientific expertise while becoming more organized, confident, and effective professionally. She appreciates being part of a team where colleagues exchange ideas, provide advice, support one another through developments, and celebrate each other's accomplishments.

Believe in Yourself and Never Stop Growing

The best career advice Shea has received is also the advice she returns to most often: believe in yourself.

For Shea, self-belief does not mean being free from doubt. Self-doubt is a natural part of growth, especially when stepping into unfamiliar territory. She has learned that encouragement from others can be invaluable, but ultimately, you have to trust your own abilities and take the next step for yourself.

Some of the most meaningful opportunities in Shea's life came when she took a chance before she felt completely ready. She believes courage is not the absence of uncertainty or fear, but the willingness to move forward despite them. Believing in yourself means giving yourself the opportunity to discover what you are capable of.

These lessons have given Shea a greater willingness to embrace change, remain curious, and continue growing. They have also shaped the advice she offers to young women entering science. She encourages them to find environments where they feel valued, respected, and supported, while also learning to recognize the value they bring themselves. Shea believes women should be willing to take calculated chances. Whether it is accepting a new position, moving somewhere unfamiliar, pursuing a different field, or saying yes to an opportunity that feels slightly beyond their comfort zone, stepping into the unknown can create possibilities that would not otherwise exist. Not every decision will be easy or immediately understood by others, but growth often begins where certainty ends.

For Shea, growth is not about becoming someone entirely different. It is about continuing to discover who you are, trusting that person a little more, and remaining open to who you might become next.

Women in Science: Creating Space to Grow

For Shea, being a woman in science is not only about representation—it is also about having the

freedom and support to discover what kind of scientist you want to become. Throughout her career, she has been fortunate to learn from women who demonstrated that there is no single definition of success in science and that a fulfilling career can take many different forms.

Throughout her career, Shea has been fortunate to learn from women who have influenced her in different ways. Female professors and academic advisors encouraged her academically, PALS leaders showed her the value of mentorship and community, and managers and colleagues helped her continue growing professionally. Friends, family, and supportive communities have also reminded her that growth rarely happens in isolation. Their encouragement has helped Shea develop the confidence to explore opportunities and trust her own abilities.

Those experiences have shaped her belief that a career can evolve alongside the person building it. Her own transition from healthcare to biology and chemistry, cancer research, and eventually quality science has shown her that experiences do not have to fit neatly together to have value. Each chapter can offer something that becomes meaningful later, and sometimes an unexpected change in direction can lead to a path that feels more authentic.

Shea recognizes that women in science still face challenges, including unequal recognition, limited opportunities for advancement, pay inequities, and barriers to leadership. Yet she believes that progress is also created through the communities people build around them. Supportive colleagues, encouraging mentors, and workplaces that value different perspectives can give people the confidence to ask questions, develop their skills, and pursue opportunities they may not have considered for themselves.

For Shea, that sense of community is something worth carrying forward. She hopes to be part of environments where people feel comfortable learning from one another, celebrating each other's accomplishments, taking thoughtful risks, and growing without feeling that they need to have everything figured out. She encourages young women entering science to learn their craft, trust their instincts, and find people who genuinely support their growth. She believes in taking calculated chances, even when the next step feels unfamiliar, and in remembering that a career is only one part of a person's identity.

Most importantly, Shea hopes women feel empowered to define success on their own terms. There is no perfect timeline and no single path that everyone needs to follow. Sometimes the most meaningful careers are the ones discovered along the way—through curiosity, unexpected opportunities, supportive relationships, and the courage to believe in yourself before you have all the answers.

A Life Built Around Curiosity

Curiosity and continuous learning extend far beyond Shea's professional life; they are woven into the way she experiences the world. Outside the laboratory, she finds inspiration through film photography, painting, drawing, art classes, knitting, reading, caring for plants, hiking, and

exploring Denver. Her interests also extend into technology, computers, proteomics, and the evolving role of artificial intelligence in scientific research.

Running has become another way for Shea to challenge herself. She has completed a half marathon—something she once never imagined herself doing—and continues to embrace experiences that push her beyond what she thought was possible. Wellness is equally important to her, with Kundalini yoga and meditation providing space to slow down, recharge, and reflect.Though her interests span many different worlds, Shea sees a common thread connecting them. She is drawn to experiences that allow her to learn something new, develop a skill, create with her hands, or see the world from a different perspective. Her interests may take her in many directions, but curiosity remains the compass guiding them all. Whether she is creating, exploring, learning, or moving, Shea finds the same spark of discovery that first drew her to science.

Community is another meaningful part of Shea's life beyond the workplace. She is grateful for the friendships and connections she has developed throughout her time in Denver and Southeast Kansas and values the ways shared interests can bring people together. For Shea, meaningful relationships often emerge in unexpected places, creating opportunities for genuine connection and a sense of belonging. At the heart of her many pursuits is a desire to do work that matters while continuing to grow as a person. Whether she is evaluating ingredients for potential contamination, exploring a scientific question, learning about emerging technology, mentoring others, discovering a new place, or taking up a new hobby, she approaches each experience with an open mind and a willingness to see where it might lead.

Her journey from healthcare to scientific research is a reminder that meaningful careers do not always follow a straight line. Each experience can become part of the foundation for what comes next, and some of the most important opportunities can emerge when we are willing to step beyond what is familiar.

For Shea, success is not defined by a single achievement or title. It is reflected in the mentors and women who helped her recognize her potential, the communities that supported her growth, the scientific work that allows her to contribute to consumer safety, and her willingness to keep challenging herself. Her many interests are not scattered pursuits, but threads woven through the same larger story—a lifelong curiosity about the world and a desire to understand, create, connect, and contribute.

As she looks toward the future, Shea remains committed to expanding her scientific knowledge, embracing innovation, supporting the people around her, and finding new ways to make a positive impact. Her story demonstrates that curiosity can become a career, that mentorship can change the course of a life, and that believing in yourself can open doors you never expected to walk through. Most of all, her journey reflects the value of staying open—to new questions, new people, new possibilities, and whatever comes next.

Learn More about Shea Elizabeth O’Connor:

Through her Influential Women profile, https://influentialwomen.com/connect/shea-oconnor

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