LIANA NICE
Research Scientist and Project Manager, NSIP LLC.

BREEDING FOR THE MODERN CONSUMER

BY KATE HARLINE

Liana Nice is part of a team of around ten people working to change the breeding pipeline through modern computational methods and molecular data. I sat down with Liana to talk about the development of her career and her decision to join this small company.

Early Career

Liana started out as an undergraduate at Cornell University in the general biology track understanding she didn’t want a career in medicine, but unsure how else she wanted to use these skills. After working in an entomology lab, she discovered a love for plants and eventually worked in Mark Sorrells lab at Cornell where this interest blossomed into the breeding of cereals. She then went on to an extended but comprehensive graduate degree at the University of Minnesota. Here she impressively creating her own introgression population of wild barley varieties. After eight years committed to this project, she sought another opportunity as a postdoctoral researcher for a newly hired faculty member. Here she deeply developed her skills as a breeder and had the luck to learn directly from an older faculty member in the process of retiring alongside her new PI. She noted this experience for showing her how much the field of breeding has advanced.

Academia vs Industry: Tradeoffs

Liana mentioned how in the academic sphere she had a lot more freedom to set her own hours and accepted full responsibility for all of the aspects of her project. Now that she’s in industry there are stricter expectations of when she is supposed to be in the office. On the other hand, this structure has really helped her compartmentalize her work and home life. Further her company prioritizes team work and delegation so that the responsibilities of each project are dispersed among people that are expert in each aspect. She mentioned it was hard to give up this control, but also it helped drive quicker progress which was satisfying.

A Small Team with Big Impact

Liana is one of only ten people at NSIP. She says this size has helped the company establish a tight-knit team. For example, almost every afternoon the office will go on walks around the lake nearby the office together to catch up about their lives. She also said that because the company is smaller they function more like a larger lab group than a company and while there is some difference in the level of socialization between the R&D team and the breeders, people enjoy being able to flexibly move between roles where their skills are suited—not being tied into a strict structure like larger companies. Liana suspects some of this will have to change as the company is growing slowly every year and just experienced a merger. However, she noted the company is committed to maintaining their culture through an extensive interview and hiring process. She said this is very important because a bad hiring decision on such a small team has significant impacts. She relies on her strong network from graduate school to evaluate applicants.

I LOVED SEEING THAT THE PROCESS HAD WORKED FROM PIPELINE TO PRODUCT

Growing with NSIP

Liana says that she is glad to have joined industry. While the controlling aspects of her personality had to adjust to the delegation reliance of her company, she likes how the deadlines and clear compartmentalization of her projects these days help her feel accomplished at the end of each day. She also mentioned how raising a family at the same time has helped to keep her focused on the next steps of her career. Liana’s favorite part of her job these days is seeing the end results of the pipelines becoming real assigned products for NSIP’s clients.

IT WAS A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY TO SEE HOW FAR BREEDING HAS COME