How I found my outreach niche

He was 15, though behaviorally and developmentally he was about 5 years younger. Anticipating our visit, he had printed out fact sheets about various sea creatures from an online encyclopedia. Now, he eagerly showed the slightly crumpled pages to us—a group of biology graduate students visiting his school for a science day. It was a chance for him and his fellow students, all foster children with difficult histories, to forget some of their troubles while exploring the science of living things. They loved it. The experience was as rewarding for me as it was for them. Remembering how excited that boy was to “talk biology” with us helped affirm my decision to make science outreach a focus of my career. Doing so turned out to be harder than I imagined, but nothing would have stopped me from wanting to share the excitement of learning about the natural world.

As early as high school, I had volunteered and worked at zoos, enamored with watching faces light up when people learned of a new animal or ways they could protect wildlife. Throughout college and into graduate school, I never passed up the opportunity to volunteer at events that introduced children and families to science. The more time I spent working with the public, the more determined I became that, somehow, I was going to be involved in informal science education after receiving my doctorate. I thought that having an advanced degree in biology would make me particularly useful to a museum or science center. But as graduation neared, I found that there were plenty of part-time opportunities for students, retirees, and teachers—but what about a newly minted doctoral student? I was overqualified for hourly positions, and my Ph.D. made potential employers nervous. Would I demand higher pay? Was I experienced enough outside the lab? Was I only applying for an education job because I had been unable to find a research position? Both of my doctoral advisers were supportive, but they didn’t know exactly how I should pursue my evolving dream either.

After graduation, I found myself teaching part time at a university and a zoo while continuing to apply for full-time jobs and learning everything I could from these two environments. The balancing act was difficult, but those 2 years of multitasking taught me something valuable: My audiences responded best when they saw me as a real person who wanted to share my stories, not the faceless author of a science textbook or a vaguely imagined “researcher” mentioned in a news article. In person, I could dispel the myth of an awkward or arrogant scientist in the ivory tower. That human connection made a huge difference—and I realized that I wanted to encourage other scientists to reach out and make those same connections themselves.

Finally, my persistence paid off and I found the perfect position as a science education outreach coordinator at a fantastically science-minded botanical garden. I now teach science communication workshops for graduate students, oversee a doctoral fellowship program that includes science engagement training and outreach, coordinate “Meet a Scientist” Saturdays, and organize community events that connect the public with local researchers. I equip young scientists to live out my dream of reaching out to communities, and I still get to interact with children and families through some of our other classes. With every guest who meets a scientist and every child who participates in a class, I tally one more person who has a glimpse of the wonder of the world around us.

Strangely enough, all the different experiences that I gathered while pursuing my ideal outreach career seem to have left me tailor-made for a direction that I hardly believed was possible. Creating programs for elementary school children at the zoo one day and developing an entire course for college students the next prepared me for exactly where I am now, and I can’t imagine being anywhere else. ■

Maria Wheeler-Dubas is the science education outreach coordinator at the Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Send your career story to SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.
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