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.

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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.
How I found my outreach niche
Maria Wheeler-Dubas

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