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Get That Life: How I Became a Museum's Chief Curiosity Correspondent

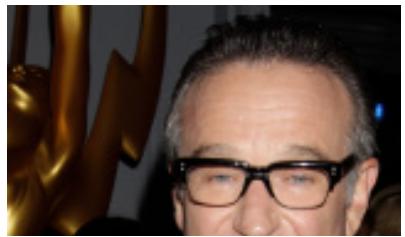
Emily Graslie thought she would be an artist. Instead, she dissects dead animals and promotes women in the sciences.



By Jill Filipovic

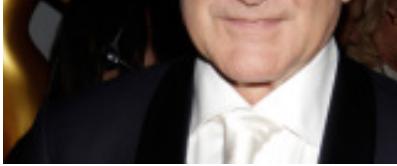


*Emily Graslie didn't mean to become a scientist. An artist by training, she stumbled across a natural history museum in Montana and got hooked on the bounty of artifacts and animal specimens. Now the star of her own YouTube show "**The Brain Scoop**" and holder of perhaps the coolest job title ever — she's the Chief Curiosity Officer at the Field Museum in Chicago — Emily travels the globe learning about the natural world, talking about women in **STEM** and making science fun and accessible. She spoke with **Cosmopolitan.com** about flesh-eating beetles, why she's a feminist, and her first time dissecting a wolf on camera.*



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8 Wonderful Robin Williams Movies That Defined...



I grew up in Rapid City, South Dakota. My father was rancher, and we had cattle on a ranch that was about two hours northeast of Rapid City, so when I was very young, I wanted to be rancher. Then I thought maybe I wanted to be a vet and work with horses and cows and rural farm animals. That persisted throughout middle school. In middle school you still do experiments, you go on field trips, you go to nature parks. Then in high school the system changes — it's more focused on performing well on standardized tests, and biology becomes more about understanding textbooks and diagrams than interacting with the natural world. So I lost my love of science and took up an interest in art. I had a great teacher named Mr. Gulbransen who let me take semester after semester of independent study painting. He set up an easel for me and I could come in on my own time a couple hours a day and just paint.

When it came time to apply for college, I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I knew I didn't want to stay in South Dakota, and I had one teacher who had given me a pamphlet for Montana State at Bozeman. So I applied to two colleges: that one, and the University of Montana in Missoula. I thought, *I like mountains and the outdoors, it's far away from everyone I've ever known, and it'll be a fun way to start over.*

I started studying art. I also played violin in the school symphony. I took some science classes, prerequisites as part of the general education requirements, but I never really got anything out of them. It was a lot of the same kind of thing you



Saverio Truglia



wanted my art to be used as an educational tool. I asked her where she had gone to learn this

were doing in high school, with diagrams and testing and not a lot of hands-on explorative science. Art is very physical, it's very emotional, it's a lot of personal self-expression and I didn't see any of that in science. I thought you had to be a certain kind of analytical, left-brained type of person to be a scientist.

My senior thesis work was a painting of a big thundercloud coming over the South Dakota prairie. It was eight feet tall and 13 feet long. I had no idea what I was going to do after college. I had never sold a painting in my life. I was like, *I am going to fail; I am going to graduate and not have a job.* A friend came to one of our art critiques, and her works were painted with hot wax. They depicted the evolution of the mammalian inner ear system. Humans have these tiny bones in our inner ear, and they evolved from what were three different bones that comprised the jaw of early proto-mammals. It was this very scientific but very engaging theme, reflective of scientific theory, informative, knowledgeable — and I wanted to do that. I

information, and she said there was a natural history museum on campus. I was floored. I had no idea. She said, "It's a closed museum for research only." And I said, "That's weird." And she said, "It's really kind of overstuffed, it's hard to get into, there's only one guy who works there." She made it sound pretty underwhelming.

A week later I was on Facebook browsing, and another friend, who was a zoology major, had uploaded this photo album showing the skeletal preparation of mammals — so, like a severed wolf head on a lunch tray, then removing the skin, then removing the muscles and putting it in with a colony of beetles that clean the flesh from the bone. I thought, *Well, this is interesting.* I begged her to take me to this place, and we wandered over to this museum the size of a classroom behind a locked door, where every single square inch is filled with some kind of specimen or informational label. The walkway is only large enough for one person to walk single-file, and all these cabinets go from the floor to the ceiling, and on the ceiling there are taxidermy birds in flight. There are rows and rows and rows of skeletal remains: 70 grizzly bear skulls, mouse skulls in little pill bottles all in a row, a giraffe skeleton.



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Then we went to the prep lab where she had done the wolf-head dissection, and there was the colony of flesh-eating beetles, and somebody was working on a bird, and there was another person working on rodents. My friend was like, "Do you want to skin a mouse for the collection?" I had done a



rubbery, they don't smell. This mouse had d f t p the organs. She walked me through the enti m + artifacts. It's the largest collection of Rocky Mountain artifacts in the world. I was like, *I want to spend time here and I will do whatever it takes, but I'm graduating in three months. I should have been a biologist. What have I done with my life?*

I got in touch with the curator, and I said, "Listen, I'm an art major. I have three credits to fill, so can I just hang out in the museum my last semester and draw specimens?" He said that was fine if I got my art supervisor to sign off on it. The first day I opened up this cabinet and said, "I'll draw whatever is in here." It was the oldest specimen in the museum, from 1851. It was incredible to me that I could see this piece of physical history. I started coming in every day. The curator said to me, "You only need to come in three days a week," and I was like, "That's OK!"

There was no room for me to set up my sketchbook because all the surfaces were taken up by specimens and labels. There was no budget to staff this museum, so I asked if I could help put some of these things away. The curator said, "Yes, but you have to be able to identify them," We're talking about mice and rabbits and birds and weasels and bighorn sheep and bears and wolves. Once we had enough table space cleared away, I was like, *Great, I'll start working on the stuff that's been in the freezers for a year.* I started facilitating tours and bringing my art classmates over to get the word out that we had this amazing educational resource on campus.



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Three months flew by and I barely had any sketches to show my art advisor, but she thought it was fine. I continued to volunteer there after I graduated. I got a job as a baker, barista, and prep chef at the local coffee roasting company, so I would go to work from 7 until 10 a.m., then run to campus

and do all these tours and talk to the school newspaper being like, "Hey, you guys should really write about this museum," and do specimen prep and then go back to my job from 6 to 10 at night. I just couldn't get to the bottom of why we didn't have more funding for this place and why, if it had so much historical and scientific value, it wasn't being utilized more often. I started pushing the administration to give us more funding and more space so we could put our stuff on display and maybe pay me for all the work I was doing there. I became convinced that if I could get enough people interested outside the university we could get funding somehow. So I started a Tumblr and posted pictures of what we would do on a daily basis. It got a large following pretty quickly. Tumblr saw it and put it on their spotlight page. I got a better camera so my photographs were better, and a few media outlets wrote about it.

I eventually quit my job as a baker after about a year and got into the Johns Hopkins Master of Art in Museum Studies program, which was distance learning, so I could do my thesis work based on what I was doing in that museum. Then I met Hank Green, who lived in Missoula. Hank is an Internet guy. He's a business owner, entrepreneur, YouTuber, and blogger. He made his name as half of the VlogBrothers, the other half being John Green, the author of *The Fault in Our Stars*. Hank and John have education channels, and one of them is "Crash Course" and the other is "Sci Show." Hank emailed me one day because he found me as the point of contact for this small museum, and he said, "I'm this YouTuber. We're doing a series on the vertebrate skeleton. Can we come in and film in your museum?" I was like, "Yes! Oh my gosh yes, this is exactly why this is here — for people like Hank to use as a

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resource."

I had been a fan of the VlogBrothers for many years and hadn't realized he was in Missoula. He came in and filmed and said maybe we could work together sometime. I kept emailing him and sent him scripts and all these ideas, and it was radio silence for six months. It was agonizing. I thought maybe I said something that offended him.



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Then, after Thanksgiving 2011, his personal assistant emailed to ask if Hank could come by and film again. Hank came in with another vlogger and online video producer Michael Aranda, and I thought we were doing another "Crash Course" episode, so I asked Michael if he wanted a tour of the

museum. Hank said, "No, we're going to wait to start filming until you've got a mic on; we're going to film you giving me a tour for VlogBrothers." I was like, "Oh, I don't have any video experience, but all right!" I gave him a tour and it went up on Friday's VlogBrothers episode. By Monday morning I had an email from Hank saying, "So that went well." It had 150,000 views and people in the comments were saying, "Emily needs her own channel!" Hank asked me if I was interested in hosting my own show. He bought me a camera and reassigned Michael to help me film these episodes. Then Hank went out of town for a month on the *Fault in Our Stars* book tour, and he was just like, "Mike and Emily, go have fun!" We launched "The Brain Scoop" on January 14, 2013.

I had never done online video. I had never been an educator. And I'm not a scientist. It was a total experiment, and we had no idea if it would be successful. One of the first things we put up was a dissection of a wolf that had been hit by a car. I did that a little naively, not sure if it was an appropriate thing to put on the Internet. But people thought it was so cool, to see the process that a natural history museum goes through to take something that was roadkill and use it.

We have about 85 episodes at this point. My favorites are the dissection episodes. We show people something that might seem gross and unapproachable, and we get our hands dirty taking our viewers through a journey of this animal and explaining what you can learn from something like that. I had learned how to prepare specimens and perform dissections from the curator at the museum in Montana, and with a lot of practice. Some old field manuals were helpful guides too.



I loved the Montana museum, and I wanted to work there forever. But our curator was leaving and that was heartbreaking, because he was the whole reason I was able to do any of this in the first place. I thought maybe I would take over as collections manager once I finished my master's degree,



but I was told they didn't know if they would have the budget or funding to even keep the position and they may close the museum. As all of this was happening, a fan of mine who had seen the show and had been a longtime member of the Field Museum told me it would be cool if I could go to a larger museum like that and check out their behind-the-scenes work. We had been doing the show for about six weeks so I got in touch with the museum and asked if I could come film the members' night. They said, "Absolutely! We're huge fans of 'The Brain Scoop.'" They welcomed Michael and me to film for three days.

They kind of tricked me into a job interview. The last day I was here, they told me they were interested in getting my opinion on how their members' night event had gone. I went into this conference room and was talking to Bill Stanley, a collections curator and mammalogist and a strong advocate for me to come and film, and I'm drinking my coffee and eating a cookie, and there are some other people in the conference room — the director of marketing, the director of public relations, the director of programming, a vice president. So Bill Stanley said, "You know we really like 'The Brain Scoop' and we're big fans of this video web series idea, and we think it would be really cool for the Field Museum to do something like this where we could engage Chicago kids and their parents into coming into

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the museum." I said, "That would be awesome, you could find someone so easily." He said, "It should be you. We would like you to come to the Field Museum and bring your show with you." I was floored. I was crying, shaking — I didn't finish eating my cookie. I said, "I have to talk to Hank — this is his show — but I would love to have that opportunity." I moved here in July of last year. I became the first-ever Chief Curiosity Correspondent.



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I travel to different institutions and universities and academic bodies all over the United States to talk about the value of communicating science to the public. I also talk about diversity and the lack of women scientists. I've given talks at the jet propulsion lab in Pasadena. I've participated in

conferences and conventions at MIT, at Johns Hopkins, at the American Museum of Natural History. I'm going to Kansas soon. Public programming, outreach, and events for science communicators is a lot of what I do, to represent the field museum and our ongoing research and evaluate how we can better reach the public and integrate more people into our mission. This museum exists for the public. We only have 1 percent of our artifacts on display, so when you come for a visit, you're only seeing a tiny fraction of what we have in storage. And in storage, it's not just sitting there — it's there to be researched and studied. I talk to people about our artifacts and the potential to learn so much about our natural world.

The whole model of how science is being taught in our schools needs to change. I want women and girls to feel empowered in their own knowledge-seeking. I want there to be less of a stigma against inquisitive learning. It was like that for me in high school — when you expressed an interest in science or biology, people made fun of you for being a nerd. It has this negative connotation that's detrimental for fostering an interest in science for women especially. I always encourage girls to pursue what interests them. I didn't get to be where I am because of how I look. It's not like somebody said I should be doing this position. I'm not an actress playing a role. I'm playing myself, the person who was studying art and who didn't realize I could be good at science.



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If you want to work in a museum like this one, I recommend volunteering, above all else, to know what you want to do. We have just as many volunteers and interns as we do paid staff members. We have great summer volunteer [positions] and internships, some paid, for high school and college

women in science. That's the best way to get your foot in the door. Studying biology helps, but a lot of the people who work here now were art majors from the Art Institute in Chicago. They're good with their hands, they have good observational skills, they're neat and tidy to do some of the more meticulous science illustration. Just be excited about sharing your knowledge. That's the best way to get involved.

I have no idea what's next. I hope to show people that you don't have to feel tied to what you studied in college or what your interests were at some point in your life. I want people to think critically, *What is it I love doing?* I want empower people with the knowledge and tools necessary to figure out what they love, regardless of people saying, "You're not good at that or that's not going to pay the bills." If you could do anything in the world, what would it be? Life is too short to compromise what you want for someone else's agenda.

I feel like I have the best job in the world. I get to spend my days talking with researchers and people who are experts in their fields about new scientific discoveries. I've dug up fossils of 52 million-year-old fish in Wyoming. I got to go deep into caves full of bats in Kenya and it was hot and disgusting and humid and it smelled horrible, but it was the most incredible experience. I got to go on safaris and speak with Kenyan biologists about their work. I go to Peru in October to document firsthand what it's like to save the rainforest.



Saverio Truglia



My show has had a relative amount of popularity, but what pushed it over the top was [a video](#) I made last November about a lack of female science role models. I identify strongly with being a feminist and not making feminism a dirty word — trying to encourage girls and minorities to represent

themselves in the sciences. This shouldn't be an old white man's world anymore.

Get That Life is a weekly series that reveals how successful, talented, creative women got to where they are now. Check back each Monday for the latest interview.

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Photo credit: [Saverio Truglia](#).

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