

Foreword

Lexi Jamieson Marsh

The Bearded Lady Project started as a wry joke. It happened five years ago during a dark and intimate dinner conversation with my friend and personal hero, the accomplished plant paleontologist (paleobotanist) Dr. Ellen Currano. We both were near despair over our struggles to be accepted into professional worlds dominated by men. Ellen sought to lighten the mood with a funny suggestion that would seemingly right all of our wrongs: “Maybe if I just put a beard on my face. . . .”

The image struck a chord in that moment—that all Ellen would need in order to do her job would be to look like everyone else. Would simply adding a beard validate her existence? It was laughable that this quick fix could potentially right generations of wrongs toward women in the workplace.

Meeting Ellen at the restaurant in my usual flannel shirt, jeans, sneakers, and baseball cap, I was feeling pretty low about my own future in filmmaking. I was exhausted from shooting a challenging commercial with a film crew in Cincinnati—not because of long hours or technical difficulties, but because of the defeating realization that my all-male colleagues found me distracting, problematic, and out of place on set. They snickered over what I would look like if I ever “cleaned up.” On that same set, a male superior informed me that women “always say they want to direct, but when given the opportunity, they realize it’s just not for them.”

Before meeting Ellen, I figured that all my dinosaur-inspired dreams of becoming a real-life paleontologist evaporated around age seven, along with aspirations of walking on the moon or getting elected president. I still couldn’t believe Ellen traveled the world to discover ancient fossils for a living. Not only was she a paleontologist, but she was an exceptional one. Ellen had worked at the Smithsonian and, before finishing her postdoc or celebrating her thirtieth birthday, had landed a tenure-track job at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio—the location of that night’s good-bye dinner,

Lexi Jamieson Marsh
films Ellen Currano at
work in the Hanna Basin,
Wyoming.

as she had already been recruited to a new position at the University of Wyoming.

Ellen had been an inspiring friend over the past five years. Every time she returned from one of her months-long field trips to Ethiopia or Wyoming, I eagerly awaited the demise of her jet lag until she was ready to talk about her recent adventure. A close encounter with rattlesnakes during a thunderstorm; battling a baboon for a bag of oranges—hers were tales a superhero would tell. When I shared my difficult day on set with her, she admitted that she was treated the same way as a paleontologist. Her revelation broke my heart. The tears, impossible to hold back, blurred Ellen and the restaurant. The trials of my day still stung, but the reality that one of the best and brightest individuals I knew was being treated poorly among her peers broke me. *If a superstar like Ellen can't be respected for the work she does, I thought, how can an unknown filmmaker like me expect anything different?*

Steering away from the path of self-pity, Ellen turned our night around: “I mean, maybe if I could put a beard on, then I could actually do my job.”

That was the origin of this project. I couldn't forget about the absurd idea that Ellen's workplace problems might be solved not by all of her hard work and labor, but simply by putting on a beard. At two in the morning, I got out of bed, opened my laptop, and wrote to her: “Would you seriously wear a beard?” In retrospect, I realize that in a crucial and defeating moment, I was more willing to come to the rescue of a friend than I was to stand up for myself.

I attribute the ongoing success of *The Bearded Lady Project* to a handful of women who early adopted our unconventional means of challenging gender stereotypes. The original idea was to make a five-minute video to be shared on YouTube. But thanks to the many women and institutions who found value in our creation, our idea grew into two documentary films, a portrait exhibition, a scholarship fund, and now a book. But if I go all the way back, before anyone was recruited, before beards were purchased and our cameras started rolling, first and foremost the reason we are here today is my mother, Ljuba Marsh. She was the first person with whom I shared our nutty and embarrassing idea. It is always an out-of-body, surreal, and heightened emotional moment when you put your imagined concept to words. The idea was unnamed, unrefined, but one that I couldn't shake. As an artist, being able to express your ideas, especially at an early conceptual stage, is daunting. But my mother, my lifelong advocate, had always been there to listen to my ideas and would support them no matter how unpolished they were.

At this time, I was working with a very broad concept. I knew nothing of the difference between paleontologists and geologists, but I knew the message. I knew I wanted to be a voice for my friend, and to use film in a way that would have some positive impact in her life and hopefully, a positive influence on others.

The pitch to my mother was long-winded and fairly incoherent, but her response was direct and, from my perspective, off topic: “What do you need to do to get this started?” I didn’t know how to respond. She rephrased: “What would be the very first practical step you would need to take to begin filming?” An endless amount of physical and financial hurdles stood in the way of giving her an appropriate response. After a few attempts to answer, I boiled it all down to filming Ellen in the field. “So really, all you need is a plane ticket,” she responded. She was right, but as simple and as straightforward as that was, I was still unable to convince myself that now was the right time to start.

The next morning my mom placed a check on the counter where I was sitting, having coffee. “This will get you to Wyoming,” she said with a grin. “There are no strings attached, but I do want you to promise me that you won’t back down.” I took that flight to Wyoming. From April to July 2014, we officially started our adventure.

The Bearded Lady Project is about challenging the negative stereotypes in science, but its foundations are friendship, love, and support. It thrives on women supporting women: on a mother believing in her daughter and a friend fighting for the world to see her friend in the same way she always has.

This book, like this project, is a collaboration between art and science. It is a mix of scientific studies, personal essays from scientists who participated, and a glimpse of how two women made this project from start to finish. It takes a filmmaker to fight for a paleontologist. It takes a paleontologist to risk everything in support of a filmmaker. This project is stronger because of the variety of voices; it is interdisciplinary collaboration at its finest. I hope you will take away the lesson that I have learned: every one of us has the power to connect, to challenge, to advocate, and to remind each other that we are individually inspiring and collectively empowering.





