

January 2015

My liberation through science

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Recommended Citation

Mary Poffenroth. "My liberation through science" *Science* (2015): 98. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.347.6217.98>

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Science

The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS)

Working Life

By Mary Poffenroth

Building a Better Poffenroth Through Science

I always knew I would go to college—which when I think about it is a little strange, since I come from a family in which no one had ever gone to college. Born to a teen mom, I was adopted at birth by my maternal grandmother, a high school graduate, and her second husband, an eighth-grade dropout who died of alcohol-induced cirrhosis when I was a year old. My adoptive parents were the Poffenroths and so I, too, am a Poffenroth, the youngest of five siblings and the only one to graduate from high school.

Everything I knew about college came from film. On my very first day, overwhelmed with the sights and sounds of being on a real college campus, I wandered toward the comforting aroma of a BBQ. Mesmerized and distracted by all the activity, I fell into a 6-foot construction trench just inches from the source of the smell: a fire pit where a fraternity was grilling meat to recruit new pledges.

It wasn't the last hole I'd find myself in during college, but the others were less literal. As the months turned into semesters, I got a classic case of too much fun and too little class time. At the end of my second year, my major professor sat me down and said, "you are never going to graduate unless something big changes."

Teen pregnancy, alcoholism, trouble with the law—my family had done it all. I wanted to break free from old Poffenroth habits—which, I realized, I had implicitly been working to fulfill. But it wasn't until I entered my graduate program that I felt I was on the right path. My conservation work gave me something bigger than myself to strive for. It exposed me to passionate and dedicated people. For the first time, I had positive role models to inspire me, but still struggled to fit the new me into my old family.

Over dinners I wanted to discuss Emerson and Dawkins while my family wanted to discuss soap operas and game shows. One Thanksgiving, I decided to invite over a few school friends who could not be with their faraway families. As we sat for dinner, my family gravitated toward our large, mahogany table that still bore the scars of one of my mom's china-breaking tantrums. My college friends sat at a rented table. I lingered, hoping the matter would be decided for me, but when everyone else was seated there were two open chairs: one at each table. I knew my choice was consequential. I chose the place I felt most comfortable, where I could most be myself, nestled with my new family of college friends.

My liberation-through-science has brought me joy, frustration, excitement, and adventure. I have been shot at while doing fieldwork in the remote Warner Mountains of California (although they were actually aiming for quail). I've had wine with former Vice President Al Gore and dinner with nature activist Paul Watson. I have eaten my weight in olives along the coast of Spain while writing a book. I've stepped over cobras in Marrakech and looked out over the Adriatic during a cyclone in Croatia. Science made all that possible.

Today, my job is to get people excited about science. I specialize in teaching non-majors, in mega-lecture classes with 125 – 435 students per section. My class may be one of few opportunities they have in their lives to learn about such vital topics as global climate change, sustainability, and human biology. In a single year, I can reach close to 2000 students.

There are benefits to being your family's first college graduate. You can get out of doing things you don't want to do by saying you have to study. Even when you're wrong, they assume you're right. Today, 17 years after I fell in that hole, I feel less like the family outcast and more like an explorer who carved a new path. I've redefined, for the better, what it means to be a Poffenroth.

Mary Poffenroth is a full-time lecturer at San Jose State University. For more on life and careers, visit www.sciencecareers.org.