

Women's History Month 2023: Interview Transcript

In honor of Women's History Month, we interviewed seven women from Mystic Aquarium about their experiences getting into their respective careers. Each woman shared valuable insights and reflections on their journeys, including the challenges they faced, the support systems that helped them along the way, and the advice they would offer to other women aspiring to break into similar fields. Here's how each woman responded to all the questions.

Trina Barrett

1. What inspired you to pursue a career in your field, and what challenges, if any, did you face along the way? Did you have any female mentors or women who inspired you?

I have always been interested in oceans and conservation and have had many female mentors who inspired me. Laura Kezer, who at the time was Director of Education, gave me the opportunity to become the Elementary Instructor which led to 45 years teaching pre-k through 6th grade. I enjoyed designing programs and sharing knowledge with school children and membership youths. All the children were excited upon entering my classroom and learning about the ocean and its inhabitants!

I have had the pleasure of seeing many students who as a result pursued a career in marine education.

2. What do you love most about what you do? What do you like most about your fellow female colleagues?

I am impressed with every female I've worked alongside over the years. They have all shared dedication and passion for the animals and programs at the Aquarium. Many of them began as volunteers or interns working their way to employment.

3. What advice would you give to young women wanting to follow a similar path, go into the field, etc.?

Pursuing an education and becoming an intern is recommended.

4. Anything miscellaneous you want to add, feel free!

I love the Aquarium! Now retired, I still volunteer in the Sea School Classroom.

Gayle Sirpenski

1. What inspired you to pursue a career in your field, and what challenges, if any, did you face along the way? Did you have any female mentors or women who inspired you?

Even as a very young girl I knew I wanted to work with animals. I was fascinated by every type of animal and saw beauty in them all. This also inspired my work as a scientific illustrator later on. I faced no real challenges. In 1979 when I started, there were very few women working with the animals. Most were in the education department. I was one of two females in my early days as an aquarist. A few years later I had two female mentors. One was a lab technician and she taught me how to run the tank chemistry tests and make blood smears for the vets. She was super organized and meticulous with her records and data. This led to me working side by side with our vets which continued for 15-20+ years.

2. What do you love most about what you do? What do you like most about your fellow female colleagues?

I'm fortunate to have started working here at a time when we could easily get involved in just about any aspect of the animal care and there were lots of opportunities to do something new (rearing lots of seal pups, training behaviors, assisting the vets in procedures and necropsies, research trip to Turks & Caicos, collecting sharks in Cape May NJ, local collecting for exhibit specimens, exhibit design.) I was asked to lead the effort to transport our original 15 African penguins from the Baltimore Zoo. No one here had any penguin experience, so I researched penguin husbandry and called other zoos to gather information. I helped the exhibit construction crew with the features for the new exhibit. I took over the task of getting the penguins acclimated here and began the breeding program. Later I had an interest in getting involved in AZA and was encouraged to become a studbook keeper and work on the Marine Mammal and Penguin Taxon Advisory Groups (TAGs).

My female colleagues: I admire the intuitiveness of women to understand what an animal needs. Women deeply care that an animal is being nurtured properly and has everything it needs to feel safe and protected.

3. What advice would you give to young women wanting to follow a similar path, go into the field, etc.?

For young women today: they should avoid becoming part of a "pack" where they behave and think like all their peers. Be an individual on your terms and try something different that makes professors or supervisors see your potential to think for yourself. Work hard to improve writing and communication skills. These are both very important to making a good first impression.

Laurie Macha

1. What inspired you to pursue a career in your field, and what challenges, if any, did you face along the way? Did you have any female mentors or women who inspired you?

I've always had a love for animals and worked with horses while growing up then got my bachelor's degree in animal science at UCONN – working with livestock and horses. For my graduate degree I studied animal behavior based on a manatee program I did while visiting my parents in Florida. With this interest I applied and got accepted for Mystic Aquarium's internship and Virunga Mountain internship program to study mountain gorilla. I did Mystic Aquarium's internship first and fell in love with marine mammals.

It was a difficult road of making decisions, being young, just out of college and trying to decide what to study. Once getting my first job out of college and still being here now for 33 years I have experienced some challenges being a woman in the field that was initially dominated by men. Advancing in the field and being accepted for ideas and technical knowledge was also not well received. Times have changed over the years, and it is a more diverse field and equality is a strong message and all are respected for their contributions.

[I had no female mentors because it was a] ...male-dominated field.

2. What do you love most about what you do? What do you like most about your fellow female colleagues?

I feel I'm the luckiest person to have the career path I've had; no two days are the same and working with the incredible animals and staff inspire me daily. Today our field is a more female-dominated field, and the empowerment and successes today are rewarding.

3. What advice would you give to young women wanting to follow a similar path, go into the field, etc.?

Follow your dreams with a positive attitude, motivation, and passion and you will have a lifelong career that inspires you and it's never a day of work!

4. Anything miscellaneous you want to add, feel free!

Didn't really know anything about penguins starting here and being newest staff member, I was always put in the penguin routine, they were quite nippy back then, and that is how our award-winning penguin training program was born.

Amy DelMonaco

1. What inspired you to pursue a career in your field, and what challenges, if any, did you face along the way? Did you have any female mentors or women who inspired you?

I went to college at Roger Williams in Bristol, RI. As a young kid, we would drive to Mystic to spend the day. Of course, to visit the Aquarium, the village, and dinner at the Steak Loft. These provided some amazing family memories that I cherish today. I also volunteered at the aquarium in high school and in college. The amazing people I worked with along the way inspired me to want to work at the Aquarium. These people were kind, loved their jobs, and were very dedicated. I also

volunteered in the education department. This almost made me change my major to teaching, but I loved the marine biology program at my school. We were in a great location for all the field work we participated in. My college had many lectures in science and guest speakers that came to the college. I would say that all these experiences led me to pursue a career in my field. I had many amazing college professors and only one or two of them were women. They were also very inspiring to me.

2. What do you love most about what you do? What do you like most about your fellow female colleagues?

The best aspect of my job is waking up each morning and arriving to work. The early morning fish prep, the traveling teachers packing up for the day on the road, the cleaning of the exhibits, the front-line staff prepping for the guests to arrive, and the dedicated early morning volunteers on site. I am humbled to be a part of an organization where teamwork, dedication, and a love for the ocean and the animals is something that I am a part of every day. Not everyone has been excited to go to work every day for the past 25 years as I have. My fellow female colleagues are one of a kind. They are dedicated, they are amazing, they sacrifice, they pour their heart into our mission, and always with a smile.

3. What advice would you give to young women wanting to follow a similar path, go into the field, etc.?

I would give young women the advice that entering the world of science is an area that can bring you to many different places. We need your generation to follow our mission. We need to protect our environment for many different reasons. So be strong, be confident, and teach and educate the next generation.

Deb Pazzaglia

1. What inspired you to pursue a career in your field, and what challenges, if any, did you face along the way? Did you have any female mentors or women who inspired you?

I grew up next to a farm and my first job was feeding the cows for 10 cents in 2nd grade. My mom was a teacher and always had animals in the classroom for kids to learn from and our house was filled with pets and rehabilitating the local wildlife. I always thought that would transition into becoming a veterinarian. When I discovered I could work alongside animals and build a bond with them, my life changed. My first professional job was working with Chimpanzees at Tulsa Zoo, then moving onto Disney's Animal Kingdom to work with Gorillas. The biggest challenge I had was balancing a career and motherhood. I gave up my dream job working with great apes to move home in Connecticut to raise a family. There were no great apes in a zoological setting in Connecticut, but I couldn't give up my passion for working with animals. I transitioned into working with California sea lions at Mystic Aquarium and I've been living the dream for 22 years. I found a facility where I can balance a healthy home/work atmosphere which made this transition possible. One of the biggest challenges in the animal field and motherhood is having to be flexible and always available. The animals always need your care. It doesn't matter if there is a hurricane or if it's 2:00 in

the morning and an animal needs some medication, you will find a way to be there for them. The same holds true as a mother to your own children. I'm proof that you can do both!

I loved reading about Penny Patterson and all the work she did with Koko the gorilla that learned sign language. All my projects in school revolved around her work. Then I discovered the amazing contributions Jane Goodall has made for woman in the science field. I wanted to be her, in the rainforest studying Chimpanzees. These women inspired me to seek a career working with primates and to teach others. It doesn't matter if it's a chimpanzee or a sea lion- all these animals remind us of the importance to respect the environment we live in and the space we share with animals.

2. What do you love most about what you do? What do you like most about your fellow female colleagues?

The best part about working at Mystic Aquarium is making a difference in the lives of animals. No one cares more for the animals than trainers who work with them every day. The incredible relationships we build with the animals during their training sessions allow us to make connections with our guests. I know the sea lions trust me when I introduce them to a person they have never met before. When I see a kid's face light up when they meet a sea lion, that's how I know that I have made a difference in their life and the animal's. Now this person wants to help protect sea lions and the ocean where it lives which makes the world a better place. I've got the best job in the whole world, and I'm so blessed!

The woman I work with are the most passionate, caring, intelligent people. We all share the same dream of loving what we do and wanting to share it with anyone who will listen. I love that they are so diverse in the jobs tackled on a daily basis. One day they may be driving a huge cargo truck for an animal transport or stacking heavy pallets of fish. The next day they could be scuba diving to clean the habitats and as guest arrive, they are reading a book underwater in a Dr. Suess outfit to encourage read across America to young sea schoolers. I love that the woman I work with help with research, write papers for scientific journals, are lead veterinarians working with 1,300 lb. animals. We do it all and we do it well.

3. What advice would you give to young women wanting to follow a similar path, go into the field, etc.?

As a woman in the animal care field, you can be a mom and have a family, be a leader, a teacher, a caretaker. You can do it all. I'm living proof of someone who can wake up every day and say they truly love their job where it doesn't even feel like work- I get paid to do what I love. Not everyone can say that. For someone who would like to follow this path I would encourage them to seek an education where they earn a degree but also get involved in "hands on" experience. It is the real-life experience working alongside an animal, studying its behavior, where you gain knowledge and work ethics. Be ready to work hard, get dirty but also enjoy connecting with animals and the people you are trying to educate. You will

become the advocates for any animal you have the pleasure of caring for and share their stories on behalf of all their counterparts on our ocean planet.

Mary Ellen Mateleska

1. What inspired you to pursue a career in your field, and what challenges, if any, did you face along the way? Did you have any female mentors or women who inspired you?

I grew up spending (and continue to spend) countless hours outside hiking and exploring, and these experiences have shaped how much I appreciate our natural resources. That is why I love that through my job I can bring the Aquarium's mission to life and hopefully inspire others to join me (and the rest of the amazing Education & Conservation team) in making conservation, education, and research part of your everyday life.

I wouldn't say that I faced any unique challenges – there has always been people along the way who told me (and some cases still do), that you might not be the best person for that role/job, that you should go back to school to get a more advanced degree, that conservation/protecting the environment isn't what people care about, and so on. But I am REALLY stubborn and if I believe in something, feel like it is the right thing to do, and believe that I can do it – I will try with every fiber of my being to make it happen!

I am and have always been surrounded by inspiring women! From my grandmothers, mother, and sisters who are some of the strongest women I have ever known – the number of challenges that these women face and overcome with courage, grace, and laughter would make anyone's head spin – to my friends who work to inspire others to protect endangered amphibians, local habitats, dolphin species and even dogs and cats. These are just some of the women who I admire and are inspired by each day.

2. What do you love most about what you do? What do you like most about your fellow female colleagues?

I love that I work with so many community members who all share the goal of having a positive impact on the environment, plant and animal species, and each other.

3. What advice would you give to young women wanting to follow a similar path, go into the field, etc.?

The biggest pieces of advice I have is:

- a. Never be afraid to try something new – I NEVER thought I would be doing what I do today! If I hadn't tried to tag my first horseshoe crab on a long walk at the beach at night after meeting two delightful people walking to conduct sampling or saying yes to becoming an Overnight Instructor when I thought, I wanted to be an animal trainer; I would not be in the position I am today.

- b. Ask for help when you need it but don't be afraid to help others when they are in need. Helping another person succeed does not take away from your own success.

Allison Tuttle

- 1. What inspired you to pursue a career in your field, and what challenges, if any, did you face along the way? Did you have any female mentors or women who inspired you?**

With a love of both the ocean and animals, a career in marine veterinary medicine seemed like just the thing! It's many years of schooling and postgraduate training, but it's worth it! I was supported in college by my professor Dr. Kate Verville who gave me the advice and support I needed to apply to vet school!

- 2. What do you love most about what you do? What do you like most about your fellow female colleagues?**

Our mission is so important. And providing world class animal care to our animals is my passion. Working with so many strong and capable women is inspiring every day!

- 3. What advice would you give to young women wanting to follow a similar path, go into the field, etc.?**

I would tell all young women to follow their hearts, work hard, and not to let anyone tell them their dreams aren't possible! They can do it! Just be persistent and things will work out!