

When Life Gave Me Lemons, I Made **Antarctic Lemonade**

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Two of the most important events of my life happened one week apart. I defended my PhD in September 2014. One week later, I got married. I was starting a whole new life, but while my personal life was blooming, my professional life felt like a road to nowhere. My passion for science, research and the ocean had slowly drained during my grad school years.

I battled through sexual harassment, bullying, discrimination, depression and anxiety. I suffered it all and was exhausted. I felt like a failure. I was not myself so decided to do something bold. I took a break from research.

The first thing that I did was to join AWIS and ECUSA (the Association for Spanish Scientists



in the USA), and I got a job as a lab technician at the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH, Smithsonian Institution). I started attending 'women in STEM' events, science communications panels, science diplomacy conferences, and soon founded and chaired the Commission for Women in STEM (MECUSA) at ECUSA. Thanks to my advisor and peers at NMNH, I recovered my passion for science and the ocean, but I also faced some challenges for being a woman in STEM. I was still

feeling that I failed professionally and missing something. Then one day while on unpaid maternity leave, I found out about Homeward Bound.

Taking a chance

Homeward Bound is a global initiative that looks to fight climate change by challenging the leadership status quo and promoting gender equality. The innovative and ambitious idea

is to help 1,000 women over the course of 10 years to get to leadership positions to influence (or become) climate change policy makers. Each year, 100 women are selected from all over the world to participate in a year-long leadership and empowerment program for women in STEM that culminates in an all-female expedition to Antarctica. Homeward Bound is based on studies that demonstrate that women's leadership in political decision-making processes improves them, and diversity in work teams encourages creativity in finding solutions to challenges.

The project immediately caught my attention so I decided to apply, despite having only 10 hours to submit my application. My self-esteem was yelling, 'why bother? you're not going to be selected.'

A little voice was also whispering, 'this is perfect for you and you are perfect for it, you should try!' Perhaps I was going nuts due to sleep deprivation—my daughter was only 3 months old—but I decided to ignore my impostor syndrome and go for it. I dictated my whole application to my husband while breastfeeding, and one month later I was notified that I got in! I'm not ashamed to say that I cried when I found out (and my husband did too).

I was in Antarctica from mid-February to mid-March of 2018 with 75 women, from all over the globe, with different STEM backgrounds and career paths, and different ages. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience that helped me change my perspective about my career and about myself.

During our Antarctic journey we received communication, visibility, and leadership training. We had multiple conversations about gender equality in STEM, the problems and barriers women face, and how to overcome them. We shared personal experiences—most of them were surprisingly similar, despite coming from different countries. And what was most shocking to me is that we all, at some point in our careers, felt that we didn't fit and were not supposed to be in academia.

One day, surrounded by icebergs, whales and seals, it hit me.

We don't need to fit in, the system needs to change. This academia was not created with women in mind – so, of course, we don't feel welcomed. I experienced an 'it's not me, it's you' aha moment that made me realize I didn't fail. I learned to be stronger and better.

Getting out of my comfort zone

Believing that I was not good enough for research forced me out of my comfort zone and into exploring other aspects of science. By feeling like a failure, I became interested in science communications, science diplomacy, science policy, and

advocacy. I learned how to be comfortable being uncomfortable. I learned how to silence my inner voices that said, 'I don't have what it takes to be a scientist.' All of my bad experiences through my career until that point had broken me, but I took all the pieces and reconstructed myself in a 2.0 version. I believe it was my break from research that made me a better researcher, collaborator, and a stronger leader.

While sailing in the Southern Ocean, I understood that it was my time to go back to research, to be the role model that I didn't have, and to contribute to build a more diverse, inclusive and kind academic ecosystem. Today, I give seminars, talks and workshops to women and men at universities, research centers and associations about my story and what it means to be a woman in science, overcome the obstacles, and become an ally.

I made lemonade in Antarctica with some of the smartest, talented, badass women in STEM. Together we toasted to re-imagining academia taking into consideration women and other minorities and pursuing gender equity as a solution for climate change. Cheers! 🍹

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