

Origin Story: Neen LeMaster

It's clear that there is no one path to a career or role in scientific editing and publishing. Origin Stories was created to capture the circuitous routes of these careers and the interesting stories of the twists and turns along the way. The editors encourage readers to email your origin story to scienceeditor@councilscienceeditors.org.

Hiking is where I find clarity. In early 2021, I embarked on a project to hike with a 22 lb. mace in all fifty US states. A mace (or gada) is a spherical weight mounted on a long shaft used in strength training to build grip, back strength, and shoulder endurance. The inspiration for this was the idea that while we cannot necessarily predict the path, we ultimately decide what we carry with us and how to respond to the circumstances presented.

I was 2 years removed from being diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis and undergoing pacemaker surgery later the same year. Prior to both, I'd taught yoga full-time for 5 years after spending the previous 5 years working for a journal of Shakespeare studies. After recovering from surgery, I serendipitously found a job as a buyer and associate at a gourmet cheese shop. For a food science nerd who loves making cheese and curing meat, it was a perfect return to work and brought an immense sense of fulfillment.

The shift in customer relations brought on by the pandemic put a huge strain on the shop's staff. For most of 2020, we worked every day. On rare days off, I found respite in Shenandoah. The trails were a 2-hour drive away, and as soon as I hit the park boundaries, mobile phone service evaporated. Once air travel was safer, I started putting more time into my project, and destinations became further afield.

In late 2021, I was in western Texas outside of Palo Duro Canyon State Park on an uncharacteristically foggy morning. All at once, endless plains gave way and broke into a massive canyon as the fog burned off. A royal blue sky contrasted sharply against the orange-red cliffs and my jaw dropped. When I reached the summit of the Lighthouse Trail hours later, I thought, "It's time."

I'd pushed aside my desire to be back in publishing in between bouts of rejected applications, but on almost every hike my mind wandered back to trying again. It was hard



to convince hiring managers that what appeared to be an 8-year career gap wasn't one at all. While teaching yoga, I completed a Master's certificate in nutrition, developed curricula for students, ran my business, and wrote 3 books of poetry. As a cheesemonger, I worked with dozens of vendors, managed staff, wrote copy, and participated in a national conference and competition. 600+ applications later, I eventually connected with a managing editor who saw beyond the titles I'd held to the skills they required.

Six months after that hike in Texas, I was hired as the Editorial Coordinator at the American College of Gastroenterology, a role where I thrive and grow continually. When I look over my shoulder, I remember standing in the shop, looking at my shoes caked in burnt orange sand and letting myself hope.

The path always holds surprises, but we choose what to carry, how to keep putting one foot in front of the other, and stay determined.

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