PRO TIPS

Talking about science

The importance of your origin story

BY SANDRA SVOBODA



REPORTERS AND PRODUCERS will often ask sources a version of "How and why did you get to your current position doing this work?" They're not asking you to thank human resources or the tenure committee.

I recently finished a media-training project with a dozen-plus scientists and executives from the International Institute for Sustainable Development, and I was struck by the variety of answers they gave during our mock interviews to those questions. As a result, I though I'd provide some tips on talking about your literal starting points and how to relate them to the bigger agenda of promoting, celebrating, and valuing science in today's world.

Journalists and broadcast show hosts pose the origin-story question for a variety of reasons. It might be a way to ease you into the interview. Your answer also can help the audience get to know (and like) you as a person before the conversation jumps into more technical information.

If it's your first time talking with a journalist, they might be wanting to judge your speaking manner and style so they can gauge how to handle the rest of your chat in terms of time and style of questions they ask. If you answer "Why do you study benthos?" with a 15-minute, jargon-filled description of your first lab course with no information about why the topic relates to population or ecosystem health, you may not be building the best relationship with the journalist for future media appearances where you can share bigger findings.

If you're speaking to a class, especially K-12, the teachers are probably looking for some information from you about a pathway for their students from their science homework to your cool career. Maybe you didn't know what you wanted to do, but you found projects you were interested in and realized they could be an actual career of value—that's a great message for students.

Regardless, as a researcher, university instructor, or other Great Lakes advocate, you should have a ready, authentic origin story to help audiences get to know you, to offer credibility to your career path, and to tee up the importance of your work that will be the subject of the rest of the interview.

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How did you get here?

- Keep it concise. Don't take too much time talking about something that happened decades ago, when you have more pressing needs like talking about current work.
- If you have it, share the *a-ha* moment when you realized you would make what you do now your life's passion. You can also state a broader message: "I didn't know I was on the cutting edge of an emerging area, but my foundation in basic science prepared me to tackle this work."
- If you don't have that *a-ha* moment, try to credit a person, class, book, news article, documentary, or other such time or event that helped you realize the need or potential impact of your work on the world or the journalist's audience and community.
- Avoid clichés. Nearly everyone "went to the lake as a child" so only tell that story if there's a unique link to what you do now; for example, doing a research project on a river you canoed as a kid. Otherwise try to describe a more recent turning point or decision that got you your current job title or project. (But if you're on tv sharing your wayback story and have relevant video of you as a kid, that can work nicely.)
- Think in terms of answering bigger questions like "What gives your daily routine value to the bigger world?" This will also allow you to describe the issue and how your work is trying to solve it—the crux of the best storytelling.
- As you describe how you got to your current situation, point out what's changed since you began. Include examples that show successes or setbacks relatable to the reporters' audience while also showing the positive impact of the science.
- Consider the connection between your early work and what you're doing now. For example, "In our recently published study, I realized it was an expansion on (your personal example), work that I did (how many) years ago, and it makes me appreciate how far we've come as well as how far we have to go."