

Awards and Citations

Response by Brittney Elizabeth Stoneburg for the presentation of the 2022 Pojeta award of the Paleontological Society

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Receiving the John and Mary Lou Pojeta Award is a unique and unexpected privilege that I never thought I would be afforded. My background is not the usual path for a scientist—I grew up as a creationist, and my bachelor’s degree is in English. Hardly the usual pipeline for a paleontologist! But I fell in deep love with the concept of evolution and wanted to explore the “grandeur in this view of life.” So I rearranged my entire life and started volunteering at the Western Science Center, my local natural history museum. Seven years later, here I am: a paleontologist, a collections manager, a research scientist, a science communicator. There is a popular scientific myth about your body replacing itself every seven years as your skin cells shed; it’s bunk, but evocative bunk that might have arisen from a universally accepted truth: a lot can change in seven years.

I am beyond humbled to be receiving the John and Mary Lou Pojeta Award and to be recognized by the Paleontological

Society in this way alongside my dear friend and colleague Gabriel Santos. One does not go from creationist to paleontologist without community, without encouragement, without shoulders to stand on and hands to pull you up. I hope I can pay such generosity forward one day.

I attended California State University, Fullerton, for my master’s, and I have nothing but praise for the Environmental Studies Department and their flexibility with working students like me. Thank you to my advisor Dr. Nicole Bonuso for her guidance, and a special thank you to Dr. April Bullock, who encouraged me to nurture my continued love of the humanities in the midst of studying for a science degree.

To name every paleontologist and museum colleague who had a hand in my professional journey would require me to exceed my word count, but rest assured, I know you and cannot adequately express my thankfulness that each of you gave your time, your expertise, and your collegiate spirit to someone who was never quite certain she should be in your midst. Thank you also to my numerous friends who have reminded me that I am not just a paleontologist, but a person who needs things like sleep and a work/life balance. Thank you to my family for your endless encouragement—you didn’t roll your eyes when I was six and said I wanted to be a paleontologist, and you still didn’t when I was twenty-six and said the same.

Finally, I would be remiss in not thanking the man who perhaps has had the most outsized effect on my career. Thank you, Dr. Alton Dooley, for seeing something in me I could not quite see in myself when we first met all those years ago. In that way, you are the consummate paleontologist—we see the potential in every fossil we dig up, filling in the taxonomical, ecological, and taphonomical blanks, seeing what it was and what it could be. Thank you for seeing the potential in me.

And of course, last but so very much not least, I must thank Gabriel Santos—my partner in scicomm, the first scientist I met who I truly wanted to emulate. I am so proud of our work together, of receiving this award along with you, but the thing I continue to be most proud of after all of these years is our friendship. I can’t wait to discover what we both do next.

Thank you all.

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