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Q & A with Emily Calandrelli

By Patricia J. Murphy | Mar 28, 2022

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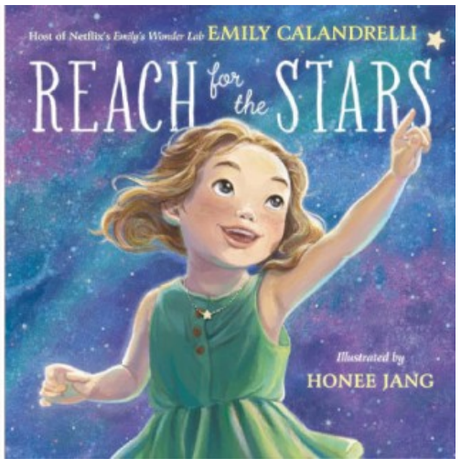

Emily Calandrelli is Newton's First Law of Motion in action (an object at rest will stay at rest, and an object in motion will stay in motion unless a force acts on it). That's because Calandrelli is constantly on the move. An MIT engineer turned Emmy-nominated science TV host, Calandrelli (aka @TheSpaceGal) is the host and an executive producer of Fox's Xploration Outer Space *and* Emily's Wonder Lab *on Netflix. She's also the author of the Ada Lace Adventures chapter book series, with Tamson Weston, and the picture book debut* Reach for the Stars*, illustrated by Honee Jang. Calandrelli spoke with* PW *about how choosing to study engineering in college expanded her universe, what changed the orbit of her career, and why she's laser-focused on helping her readers and viewers stay curious and keep exploring STEM.*

What made you pursue a career in STEAM?

I didn't grow up knowing any scientists and/or engineers, and I'm the first person in my family to pursue a degree. My dad grew up in poverty in West Virginia, and he worked his way up to the middle class. So, when I was in high school and trying to decide what I would major in college, I had his legacy in the back of my mind. I thought about how hard he worked to get where he is today, and I wanted to take that and go further. I literally Googled all the majors that I could take in college and their starting salaries, and discovered that engineers made the most money after a four-year degree. So I chose to explore a career in engineering. I thought that it was going to be the hardest and worst four years of my life—I'd have no social life, etc., but I believed that I'd end up with a good job that would make my family proud.

What happened next? Did your hypothesis come true?

When I went to college and started learning about all of the opportunities open to a student in STEM, I became obsessed with it—and I had the best time. I was able to do so many different things including flying on the *Vomit Comet* [a NASA program that introduces astronauts to the feeling of zero-gravity spaceflight] and traveling the world. I lived in California when I interned with NASA, and in China during my National Science Fellowship. So while my story reluctantly started in STEM, I became passionate about it and went on to earn two undergraduate degrees in mechanical engineering and aerospace engineering, and two masters in aeronautics and astronautics engineering and technology and policy. And, now, I'm trying to share what I've learned about science and the exciting opportunities that can come your way with a career in STEM.

How do you think the spark in college ignited your love of science and informed your career path?

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Because I didn't come from a family of scientists or engineers, I went through college very intimidated by all of it; and, I think that it might have taken me a little bit longer to learn science concepts than if I had grown up around family members who were talking about electronics, taking apart radios or working on cars. Because of all of this, it's really important to me that my work makes science feel welcoming and accessible to people with all kinds of backgrounds. I also want it to be normal for girls to be excited about science—including engineering—and see STEM as a career path. Right now, I don't think it's very welcoming, and I want to change this.

What are you doing to change this and make STEM careers more female-friendly?

For me, representation is a big thing, and I'm trying to increase the level of female representation with my books and programs. As little girls, we don't often see many people who look like us in STEM careers. This makes it harder for girls to envision ourselves going down that path. With this in mind, I want girls to have somebody to look at, and be like: "Oh, that person kind of looks like me —maybe I could do that!" There's definitely progress being made —but it's not happening as quickly as I'd like.

Why do you believe more women in STEM is crucial for women—and society?

Having women in science impacts how our society operates. When you don't have women involved in the design process in science, engineering, and technology, you are going to have inefficiencies that exist—and these are going to be harmful to women. So we need more women involved in the design process to help make society more efficient, productive, and safe.

What roles have education and chance played in your STEM career path?

When I was graduating from MIT, I was looking for a job that was likely going to be in D.C. working for some policy-related science place like the Office of Science and Technology Policy, when I received a call from a production company. They had seen my videos online talking about engineering, and asked if I'd like to host a new show called *Xploration Outer Space*. I thought that it sounded like a fun adventure, and that it married a lot of things that I'm passionate about, including talking about science in ways that people can understand, presenting, performing—and space. They offered me a chance to travel the country and to talk to people who are doing the coolest things in the space program. And, so, I said yes. This decision completely changed my career.

While hosting/producing *Xploration Outer Space*, you had a chance to work with Bill Nye the Science Guy. What did you learn from him?

After meeting and then interviewing with Bill Nye, I got a job as a correspondent on *Bill Nye Saves the World*. I've always held him in high regard because he's a master of his craft. He's good at being both knowledgeable about science and smart about entertaining. I learned from him that it's all about tapping into the human experience in a very thoughtful, wonderful way.

And, then something even more wonderful happened: you got your own show—*Emily's Wonder Lab*–on Netflix! How did it come about, and what makes your show different from other kids' science/STEM shows?

I had been working with a producer for a number of years on a possible children's science show with me as the host. We shopped it around at various networks and got a few nibbles, but nothing came of it. But then, someone at Netflix who had heard our earlier pitch thought its network might be a good place for our show since they were looking for a science program. So, we pitched it to the network, and they liked it! They tweaked the idea a little bit, but then they gave the show the green light. I think that what sets *Emily's Wonder Lab* apart from other science and STEM shows is that we do an experiment at the end of the show for kids and parents to do at home.

In fact, I have a book coming out this fall called *Stay Curious and Keep Exploring: 50 Amazing, Bubbly, and Colorful Science Experiments to Do with the Whole Family* [Chronicle]. It's inspired by our viewers' response to these science experiments. In the book, there are 50 of my favorite experiments that are very accessible and don't require too many ingredients—most you can find around the house—and teach interesting things. My goal was to give kids and families more resources for them to be "curious and keep exploring" [Emily's Wonder Lab's tagline].

On top of creating a STEM-based children's TV show, how and why did you begin to write books for kids?

It began when I thought about books that I wished I had read when I was a girl. I wanted my first children's book to include science, adventure, and a girl main character—and to be fun while teaching a little bit about science and technology. That's how and why I came up with the Ada Lace Adventure series. The story features a third-grade girl, Ada Lace, who is named after Ada Lovelace, the English mathematician, who loves mysteries and uses technology and gadgets to solve them.

You also used your experience of becoming a mother as inspiration for your debut picture book, *Reach for the Stars.* Can you tell us about how that inspired you?

I wrote the story in the first months after the birth of my daughter, Rose, and through the postpartum emotional lens of becoming a new mom. I put down on paper all of the feelings that I had about becoming a first-time mom. There were also so many things that Rose was learning every day, and things that she was literally reaching for. So I started imagining all of the kinds of things that she would reach for throughout her life, and then paired them with all the things that I hope to teach her. The story takes the reader through a parent and child relationship while the child's going through all of the stages of life—from infancy to leaving home for college. I wrote this book for my daughter and for all parents and children to keep on reaching for the stars.

***Reach for the Stars* by Emily Calandrelli, illus. by Honee Jang. Holt, $18.99 Apr. 5 ISBN 978-1-250-79734-6**

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