

# STEM SPOTLIGHT

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Ph.D. in Geology – Auburn University  
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**Q: How did you select your college major?**

**A:** For me choosing my college major was easy – it had to be geology. I chose geology because that was where the study of fossils occurred and I had been a collector of marine fossils from my own back yard from the time I was very young. I am a big beach-lover, so when I found fossil sea shells so near my home, which was over 90 miles from the Atlantic Ocean, I was intrigued as to how that could be. Then I found out they were nearly 10 million years old! Much older than anything made by Man in my historic hometown of Williamsburg, Virginia. How cool is that?

**Q: What was the biggest influence in your selection of major/career?**

**A:** I was heavily influenced by Dr. Gerald Johnson, the paleontologist at the College of William and Mary. I first met him as a middle school student and heard him speak on fossil whales when he visited my school. Later, when I entered William and Mary as a college student, he became my mentor. He clearly loved his work and loved to share it with others....his enthusiasm infected me.

**Q: If you could go back to high school and select any elective course to take that**

**would have better prepared you for college, what would it be?**

**A:** Like most students, I struggled with mathematics. At that time I did not see the connection of mathematics to fossils and science, so I avoided advanced mathematics in high school. If I were to do it again, I would have taken more math classes. I would have also probably tried to fit more art classes into my curriculum.

**Q: What is your favorite aspect of your job?**

**A:** Oh, absolutely the fieldwork! Paleontology is about finding the remains or traces of organisms that lived millions of years ago in places that are drastically different today. The ultimate in studying global change! The fieldwork is about discovery and discovery in exotic places.

There is no greater thrill than uncovering a bone or shell that no other human being has ever seen and that has been buried for millions of years...just waiting for me! The bonus is I get to do fieldwork in fun and exotic places. I have worked in all of the United States, Central America, Mexico, Canada, Japan, Germany, Puerto Rico, and more.

**Q: How do you make a positive impact on society/our community?**

**A:** I am both a researcher and an educator and teach university level, as well as the high school level. I know that my teaching influences hundreds of students each year and teachers across Tennessee with my education work. I get to share my knowledge of geological processes that affect us all, but more importantly I get to help these folks learn HOW to do science and approach issues and problems of society with a scientific mind. My research adds to the overall knowledge of the Earth, and West Tennessee in particular. In rural West Tennessee, UT Martin provides true “world-class” experiences for the people who live and work here; we are the place many turn to for help and information. There is no underestimating the impact of UT Martin in our region.

**Q: What’s the most interesting thing you have been able to do in your professional career?**

**A:** I have been fortunate to have a very productive career in geology and paleontology; it is hard to choose one thing. I have discovered several new organisms, and even named two new species of fossil plants. I have been involved in finding the largest living freshwater stromatolite field in the Western Hemisphere, have worked at the Smithsonian Institution, have helped



design museum exhibits, and have overseen research at major fossil sites. I guess to sum it up...I have been able to have a well-rounded and eventful career with my beloved fossils!

**Q: What makes you get up each morning excited about your profession?**

**A:** Easy! Every day I get to spend my day doing what I like most, teaching and studying fossils. AND I get paid to do it as my job! Career and hobby all wrapped up in one!

**Q: What advice would you like to share with K-12 students who are considering your profession?**

**A:** All education is useful...take as many classes in as many subjects as you can. When you choose your career, don’t choose it based upon money. Choose it based upon what you want to do and like to do. The money will come if you like what you do and get good at doing it!