

## VIMS alumnae get high school students excited about science

By Erin Kelly

Science isn't always the most popular subject among high schoolers. Three alumnae of the Virginia Institute of Marine Science are now working to counter that fact and dispel the misperception that it's a field only fit for the likes of Einstein and Hawking.

Elizabeth Lerberg (M.S. '05) and Bethany Smith (M.S. '08) are already teaching in local high schools, while Stephanie Salisbury (M.S. '12) plans to begin next year. The trio, all graduates of William & Mary's School of Marine Science at VIMS, share a determination to convey the value of science in their students' lives and to lift the shroud of mystery that often surrounds the field.

Smith—who teaches at the Chesapeake Bay Governors School for Marine and Environmental Science—has wanted to educate youth about the importance of science since before she started graduate school at VIMS. In an essay she submitted with her VIMS application, Smith expressed her goal of one day teaching at a magnet high school. “I ended up right where I wanted to be,” she says.



*Jellies: VIMS alumna Bethany Smith (M.S. '08) studied zooplankton with Professor Deborah Steinberg as a student at VIMS. Now she teaches at the Chesapeake Governors School for Marine and Environmental Science. Photo courtesy of Bethany Smith*



*Bringing VIMS to Class: VIMS alumna Elizabeth Lerberg (M.S. '05) says the experience she gained in the labs at VIMS helps her offer her students insight into the life of a scientist. Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Lerberg*

Lerberg and Salisbury entered VIMS with goals of one day conducting research. After completing her degree program, Lerberg spent some time working at VIMS as a lab technician before ultimately landing a teaching job at Tabb High School. Salisbury—a recent VIMS grad—decided that furthering her education at W&M's School of Education was the right path for her and is currently completing her second Master's.

“As I progressed through my degree program at VIMS, I became less sure that a career in academia was for me,” says Salisbury. “I was introduced to teaching at the K-12 level when I was awarded with a GK-12 Fellowship that placed me in an 8th-grade earth science classroom. That experience served as a proving ground for me and showed me that not only did I want to do this for my career, but

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it gave me the confidence to feel like this is something I could be good at.”

All three women share a passion for helping students understand science and realize how it applies to their lives. “My goal is to help the students and the greater public understand that science is something that is totally applicable to them and that you aren’t required to be highly educated to understand what is going on in the world,” says Smith.

“One of the main underlying reasons I wanted to become a teacher is because it gives me the ability to introduce kids to a broad variety of scientific information,” says Salisbury. “I love being able to teach them concepts that will eventually help them make better life decisions and be better citizens not only of our society, but of the planet on a global scale.”

Lerberg—who studied organic chemistry at VIMS—says getting to know the students, watching them learn, and getting them excited about chemistry is the most rewarding part about being a teacher.

All three of the women agree that their VIMS advisors contributed to the different ways they approach teaching. Smith studied zooplankton with Professor Deborah Steinberg, while Lerberg and Salisbury were both advised by Professor Elizabeth Canuel.

“By observing Debbie in local classrooms,” says Smith, “I learned that it’s really important to let students have hands-on experiences and make them feel like science isn’t something above and beyond anything they could possibly understand. Debbie showed me that having the same enthusiasm when communicating science to any type of audience is a very important ability.”

Salisbury adds, “VIMS gave me the opportunity to view the teaching styles of Liz and other professors, and how they convey information to their students in an engaging way. Though teaching at a collegiate level is very different from high school, it helps shape the way you approach educating others.”

Salisbury is on the fast track to obtaining her Master’s, and hopes to follow in Smith and Lerberg’s footsteps by becoming a high school teacher. “After the experience I gained with the GK-12 program, I was able to shake my jitters out and boost my confidence to teach in front of high school students,” she says. “I hope to be in the classroom and teaching high school by next May.”

The women all agree that VIMS helped prepare them for their teaching careers. “I am able to tell my students when the subject matter they are learning is something I used often in the lab at VIMS, so I am better able to help them understand how the information relates to actual life,” says Lerberg.

Smith says if she can get her students excited about science, then she feels like she has done a good job. “Having the opportunity hear my students say they enjoyed learning about science—especially if they had a negative view of it before taking my class—is extremely rewarding,” she says. “Getting our students to realize that science does apply to their lives and the world around them is the biggest reward we could ask for.”



*Future Teacher: Stephanie Salisbury (M.S. '12) is currently completing her second Master's at W&M's School of Education. While at VIMS, Stephanie was the inaugural winner of the Nichols Student Travel Fellowship. Front row (L-R): Emeritus professor Maynard Nichols with Stephanie Salisbury, and Mrs. E. Jane Nichols. Back Row (L-R): professors Carl Friedrichs and John Brubaker (members of the Fellowship selection committee) with VIMS Dean and Director John Wells.*