

# Q&A with Molly Paul

**Interviewed by Joelle Seligson**

A decade ago, five-year-old Molly Paul declared that she wanted to be a leader in the science world. Today, the tenth grader is starting her fourth year as a junior curator at the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences (NCMNS, [naturalsciences.org](http://naturalsciences.org)) in Raleigh, which will host ASTC's 2014 Annual Conference ([conference.astc.org](http://conference.astc.org)). Paul is also founder of the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math to Leaders Engaged in Affecting the Future (STEM to LEAF) camp at NCMNS, and of Raleigh Aquatic Turtle Adoption, a local organization dedicated to saving unwanted pet turtles ([www.raleighaquaticturtleadoption.com](http://www.raleighaquaticturtleadoption.com)). She has earned awards for her student leadership and her volunteer service, and earlier this year she accompanied NCMNS Director Emlyn Koster to accept a National Medal for Museum and Library Service at the White House. Recently, Paul took some time to chat with *Dimensions* about her passion for science and her goals for the future.

## **Molly, when did you first discover your interest in science?**

Ever since I was five, I just declared that I wanted to be involved in the science world as a leader, running some kind of organization like a museum or an aquarium. And after visiting the science museum and really seeing all of the science in practice, I just fell more and more in love with it and have been ever since.

## **So how did you first act on it?**

I think the first thing I did actually was just playing in my backyard. I got outside, I observed the world around me, I started taking out a field notebook just to see what was around. I started doing a little research and really caring and wanted to explore the world around me. And in 2006, I started my own turtle rehoming organization, and so that was really the first tangible act that I did. I was still really young at the time, but it's grown and that's been really wonderful.

## **How many turtles do you care for now?**

I'm currently caring for 13 in my home, but I've rehomed 100 over the years.

**That's great. And how does that fit in with all the other science-related activities you're pursuing? I know you have quite a few activities going on.**

Well, under Raleigh Aquatic Turtle Adoption, I fundraise by selling turtle-shaped soaps, and I've raised about \$11,000 so far. And all the proceeds for that support education and preserving natural habitats for turtles. I've also collected about 1,000 signatures on a pledge that I created to not buy baby turtles, to leave nature in nature, and to support nature education. So, that's really been a wonderful tool for me, and I've been so supported by the museum.

**What is your role at the museum?**

So, I am a junior curator. We're a group of really neat volunteers. We all love animals. I get to come in once or twice a week and take care of the program animals. These are animals that we take out to show the public, to show them hands on that this is what you're working with in nature. I maintain their exhibits, I talk to the public, and I have a specific internship with the Fish and Invertebrates Department, so I actually get to take care of the fish and our sharks and it's very, very fun and interesting.

**Cool. And I know you recently accompanied the museum's director to accept a National Medal for Museum and Library Service at the White House. What was that like?**

That was so amazing. I have just been so inspired by Dr. Koster as a role model, and it was great to go to such a big event with someone I really had an example of, how do we go in public and talk about the museum? How do we interact with people like Michelle Obama? And so, it was really just an awe-inspiring experience. The First Lady was so kind and warm, and it was just a joy to speak to her, and it was really an honor to get to represent the museum on such a big stage.

**Wonderful. And you were also in D.C. for another award recently—the national award ceremony with [actor, producer, and director] Forest Whitaker at the National Museum of Natural History.**

Yes, yes, I was. That was a volunteer service medal, and that was really a joy to meet Mr. Whitaker.

**Why do you think it's important to advance STEM education?**

I've always really seen it as the way the world kind of keeps moving. This is what advances different cultures and societies, and science and technology have always played such a critical role in how the world is changing. And so, you combine what I would say is the most growing field in the world with education, and we want our youth to be empowered to live in this kind of world. I've always valued youth education; I've always been so inspired by organizations like the museum that make it their goal to reach out to everybody. Youth, adults, anyone can walk through those doors and learn, so that's really where I've seen that.

**In terms of your own education, I'm sure you're busy with schoolwork. How do you balance that with your extracurricular science-related activities?**

You know, it's never really been hard. Everyone's like, "Oh, you know that's such hard work," but you know when they say, "When you love something it doesn't really feel like work"? So I've—I like keeping busy, obviously all of the youth are very active and engaged in their community. It's keeping up with all the tough science classes, but coming to the museum—it's like my second home. There's nowhere I'd rather be. It doesn't feel like work, it's never a burden.

**Do you see yourself staying with the museum or a museum in the future? What does your career plan look like?**

Well, I've always seen myself running an organization like a museum or an aquarium where I really take a leadership role, where we still would be impacting the public with education about the environment and STEM. I've always loved the museum; I always will. I plan to stick with it for at least another two years, till I'm in college, if not longer. I just love everyone there, and I've really grown up there.

**What about other kids your age who might be looking to get involved in the same way you have? Do you have any advice for them?**

Yeah, I mean, there's so many little ways to get involved. One of the first things they ask when you interview to be a junior curator is, "Do you have any science journals you'd like to bring?" And it's little things like that, where you've taken the initiative yourself to go explore your community. There's tons of different places to volunteer. There's nature preserves, you can volunteer as—there's different ways to volunteer within the community at the museum, too. We have a teen advisory board, we have junior curators, we have teen volunteers, so there's really a variety of ways you

can get a hands-on experience helping your community. So, I'd just say to stay active and stay with it.

**Great. Is there anything I didn't touch on that you'd like to add?**

I think this is, if I understand correctly, the first time that ASTC has really had a youth focus and a youth aspect to it, and so I'm just truly grateful to Dr. Koster for this vision, to think, "Let's include youth in this meaningful association and gathering of amazing different forces in the science field." I'm very excited to see everything come together and I look forward to being a part of that.

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