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Baylee Ritter: OCEANS TO CROSS

Communication student from the rural Midwest applies her passion for advocacy to protect oceans and the environment

By Jacob Sabolo (LAS ’12)
Every year when Baylee Ritter was a kid, her father, a high school environmental teacher in Pontiac, Ill., would take a group of students to Chicago’s Shedd Aquarium to participate in learning labs with Shedd’s scientists. And every year, Ritter begged her dad to let her tag along. He always refused—until she was in the fourth grade. “He called my teacher and told her I was sick, and that I couldn’t come into school that day. I totally played hooky,” she laughs. “I was super excited that I didn’t have to go to school, but I was more excited to find out what we’d be doing at the Shedd.”

Much to Ritter’s delight and her father’s students’ dismay, they were asked to dissect a squid. “All of these big high schoolers were like, ‘Ew, gross. There’s no way I’m touching this squid, and there’s no way I’m going to cut it open.’ Then there was me, a fourth grader, who was like, ‘YES! Not only do I get to skip school, I get to do this.’” The learning lab, called Exploring Pathology: Fish Dissection, allowed students to analyze microbiomes—bacteria, viruses and fungi—in controlled aquarium ecosystems.

Ritter, who admits that she might not have comprehended the entire purpose of the lab, was blown away by the aquarium’s scientific efforts to conserve the world’s oceans and animal life. She would later realize that the day at the Shedd was one of the most influential days of her life because she fully grasped the importance of ocean ecosystems and species, as well as the need to protect the ocean. It also made her recognize that women have a place in science and conservation. “As a young girl, it was one of those moments where I got to see women in science, technology, engineering and math fields. I got to meet women researchers and look up to people that I might never have known existed,” recalls Ritter.

After they left the aquarium, her father asked her what she thought of the experience. She replied, “I think I’ve decided on my career.”

“I’m going to be a microbiome researcher.”

“Do you know what that is?”

“No, but it sounds cool.”

Microbiome research was never really in the cards for Ritter, but throughout her youth, her passion and urgency to advocate for the environment and oceans never wavered. She worked with the United Nations (U.N.), SeaWorld and Busch Gardens, and eventually made her way to DePaul, where she is currently studying public relations (PR) and advertising, communication and media, and environmental communication. In fact, it was at DePaul where she came full circle and landed an internship at the Shedd Aquarium. But long before she built up her impressive resume and became an accomplished advocate, Ritter was already doing remarkable things for the world at age 11.

It all began when she and her father launched an environmental nonprofit in 2007. The Prescription, Pill and Drug Disposal Program (P2D2) aimed to create recycling boxes for expired or unwanted medications. They came up with the idea for P2D2 after Ritter’s grandmother passed away. Ritter’s parents, who had been her grandmother’s primary caretakers, had no idea what to do with her medications. While most people simply flush them down the toilet, Ritter’s father knew that when flushed, medications enter our water supply. “We started doing all of this research, and we found that people ingest painkillers, ibuprofen and any medicines that people flush down the toilet. We all ingest it and get the effects of it,” explains Ritter.

Discarding medications into the trash was no better than flushing them down the toilet. “Pontiac is home to one of the largest landfills in the United States because we get about 5,000 tons of trash from Chicago and surrounding areas every day. Once medication is thrown away, it goes to the landfill. When it’s in the landfill, it will eventually break
down and go into our soil,” she says. “Either way, it’s going back into our earth, back into our homes.” After this discovery, Ritter felt more empowered to take action. “We knew we had to do something.”

They launched P2D2 with the help of local police stations and pharmacies. People could drop off their unwanted medications in a converted mailbox, and a local energy company would pick them up for incineration. The program quickly gained traction. Ritter remembers an instance when a woman dropped off a garbage bag full of medicine for Ritter to dispose of, and the woman broke down crying. “She said, ‘I’ve had four people break into my house since my husband died. I’ve been so afraid to live alone because I’ve had these painkillers in my house. I’ve never been more scared in my life. But now these things are gone, and I don’t have to worry anymore,’” recalls Ritter.

Since P2D2’s founding, the medicine-recycling program has grown not just in Illinois, but also throughout the country. Recycling boxes can be found in major stores with pharmacies. The program became so popular that the U.N.’s Environment Program named it the number one student-run sustainable environmental program in the United States. In 2012, the U.N. asked Ritter and four other students who helped with the program to represent the United States at the Volvo Adventure Competition in Sweden, where they contended for best environmental program in the world.

For Ritter, who was a freshman in high school, the experience was surreal. She met students from all over the world who were taking action to protect the environment in their communities. “I was in awe of these people who were my age. For the first time, I was so completely aware of how small the world actually is and the problems people I didn’t even know were facing.”

Ritter and her team met with several advisors who coached them on how to present her project and pitch it to representatives of the U.N. council.

“They were teaching us how to sell our story, and honestly, that’s why I fell in love with PR. There’s always a story to tell. If you’re on the right side of telling that story, you’re going to make a difference no matter what,” says Ritter.

They ended up placing third for best program in the world.

Ritter’s experience with the U.N. fueled her desire to get people involved with the environment. Throughout high school, she worked with the U.N. and spoke to youth in Kenya and Turkey about large and small ways to get involved. Ritter gained inspiration from those students and continues to look to them for inspiration. “I have to remember that they’re out there somewhere,” she reflects. “I always think about that and try to realize that there’s someone else out there right now who’s charging forward, who still has that fire and has not lost hope. I shouldn’t either.”

While Ritter was working with the U.N., she still managed to stay engaged with her community by turning her attention to saving endangered species. When she was a sophomore, Ritter, her father and fellow students at Pontiac Township High School started the Operation Endangered Species program and decided to save the alligator snapping turtle. For many years, people had hunted the turtle nearly to extinction in Illinois.

Ritter and the team wanted to partner with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources to bring some of the last remaining alligator snapping turtles into the classroom to breed and release the young back into the wild. But they needed funding. After writing a curriculum and guides for turtle care, they approached state legislators for funding, but their proposal was turned down.

Devastated, Ritter searched for other sources of funding and discovered that the State Farm Insurance Youth Advisory Council supported
1. Young Ritter dissecting a squid at the Shedd Aquarium
2. Ritter and classmates releasing baby alligator snapping turtles into the wild
3. Ritter at the U.N. General Assembly in 2017
4. Ritter with musician Jack Johnson at a World Oceans Day event
5. Ritter filming the documentary “Sea Youth Rise Up” in New York City for World Oceans Day 2016
school programs like Ritter’s. The council awarded Operation Endangered Species $100,000, and after running the program for three years, students at Ritter’s school released 100 turtles back into the wild. She also joined State Farm’s Youth Advisory Council as the environmental chair, representing the Midwest.

During her junior and senior years of high school, Ritter volunteered with Florida’s SeaWorld and Busch Gardens Youth Advisory Council, where she delved into ocean conservation advocacy. She worked on a project to raise public awareness of the vaquita—a small and extremely endangered porpoise. She also collaborated with executives at the parks in the wake of “Blackfish,” a documentary released in 2013 that exposed the harsh treatment of orcas in amusement parks, specifically at SeaWorld.

“I was basically advocating for the whales by saying, ‘This is what we want to see as 17-year-olds from Illinois. When we come to your parks, this is what we want now in this day and age, not what our parents wanted 30 years ago. This is how you need to change,’” she asserts.

In 2014, shortly before Ritter started her freshman year at DePaul, Bill Mott, director of the Ocean Project, approached her about applying to the World Oceans Day Youth Advisory Council. World Oceans Day, sponsored by the U.N., is an international celebration of the ocean when “people like you and me who live in Illinois . . . take time to think about how we can make a difference for oceans that are many miles away,” explains Ritter. “I fell in love with that idea.”

She continues, “The problem we have facing the environment is that people don’t think that they have any agency with certain issues. People living in landlocked states don’t think that they have an impact on the Pacific Ocean, for example, which is

“People get so bogged down and feel like they can’t really do things when they can. My message on the council was, ‘We can do it. We can do tiny things to make a difference.’”
thousands of miles away. … People get so bogged down and feel like they can’t really do things when they can. My message on the council was, ‘We can do it. We can do tiny things to make a difference, and everyone should be doing them.’”

In her first year on the World Oceans Day Youth Advisory Council, Ritter was able to share her message about ocean conservation at the U.N. headquarters in New York City. In 2016, the World Oceans Day Youth Advisory Council traveled to Washington, D.C., to meet with the White House Environmental Council. “The big thing I wanted to talk about was how we need to encourage advocacy for ocean cleanup and promote the ocean in our rural communities in Illinois and Ohio, where our rivers are directly depositing tons of debris, tons of plastic, into the ocean,” says Ritter. “How can we get more literacy out there to these communities on plastics solutions? How can we get communities recycling bins?

“The World Oceans Day Youth Advisory Council commended them for what they were doing and what President Obama had done in his years in office, but we wanted to ask, ‘How can we keep moving forward into whatever new era of diplomacy that would come with the [2016 presidential election]?’”

Ritter also spoke to thousands of people at last September’s U.N. General Assembly in New York City. While there were several delegates and high-ranking officials in the room, there were also people from every walk of life. Sitting next to her was a fisherman from Washington state whose tuna farm was being severely damaged by polluted water, and a group from Palau, an island country in the Pacific Ocean, whose income and lives depend on the state of the ocean. Also in the room were owners and representatives from plastics corporations.

“I wanted to convey that people from anywhere and people my age have just as much agency as the people sitting on the stage at the U.N., the delegates and the people who are actually making critical decisions,” says Ritter. “We have just as much agency as the people who are directly affected by the ocean, who live and breathe the ocean. Coming from the most obscure background, a farm girl who has only seen the ocean on vacation, who doesn’t really know what it’s like to depend on any body of water, who lives in a city, I wanted to say, ‘Yes, I still have a choice to make every single day about how my actions are going to impact our oceans and environment.’”

She also wanted to empower people to start making decisions about protecting the environment. “I really wanted for them to realize that our words and actions are destroying places that we might never have seen.” Ritter adamantly believes that if people take small steps to protect the environment, change will happen. “Just make simple changes to your lifestyle. Don’t use plastic straws, because they don’t degrade. Don’t use plastic bags. Make sure you’re recycling. I hope that people took that to heart and were able to go back home and make some positive changes.”

According to Ritter, her experience with World Oceans Day and advocating for the environment and ocean has provided her with a sense of purpose and drive. She hopes to use her degree from DePaul to continue to tell stories that make a difference in the world. “It’s all about being heard. Not in the sense that Baylee Ritter is being heard, but me representing people from all walks of life—not the people who are making the decisions, but the people who are being impacted by those decisions,” she says.

“One of the most fulfilling things in my life is knowing that I’m making a difference for people who are just like me. No matter if it’s an environmental issue or something else, I want their voices to be heard.”