

#ScientistsArePeople! “Mommy PhD” campaign challenges anti-GMO death, rape threats against scientists

I started my once anonymous page, [Mommy, PhD](#), at the end of January with so much enthusiasm about educating the public, spreading scientific knowledge and debunking pseudoscience. It's been a lot of fun so far! However, I have been very discouraged by our prospects for increasing public understanding of science.

Science advocates have our own little corner of the internet where we share information debunking rhetoric from the anti-vaccine movement, countering unfounded fears of the anti-GMO/pro-organic groups, and promoting accurate information relating to food safety and agriculture and genomic medicine. However, most of our audience already agrees on many of the issues we discuss. Occasionally, we'll have someone comment who doesn't already agree, but they are often there to cause trouble and do not represent the persuadable fence-sitters that we need to reach.

I have also found that when I go to other pages and try to share science-based information to challenge misinformation, no one is interested. My comments are deleted. I'm banned from pages like Food Babe's. I'm called names. I'm accused of being a “shill”, getting paid by a company (usually Monsanto) to share accurate information. Fortunately, that has been the extent of my negative experiences. Other members of this pro-science community have been attacked in far more personal ways. They are accused of being bad parents for feeding their children GM and non-organic food. There are death threats, threats of rape, being compared to Nazis. There are even organized attempts to intimidate scientists and science advocates.

In just the past few weeks, a group started a [birther campaign](#) against Kevin Senapathy. Kevin Folta and other scientists have been directly [targeted](#) by activists abusing FOIA requests. In such a hostile environment, there is no room for dialogue and sharing of information. The people who lose in this environment are the people who aren't scientists and genuinely want accurate information to help them make good decisions for themselves and their families.

This open hostility toward scientists and science advocates is one of the reasons I kept my identity concealed. I did not want that negativity to spill into my personal life. However, I've realized that I can be more effective in increasing public awareness and knowledge of science if I can be me.

Scientists need to more involved in discussion of scientific issues. We have largely left the public conversations to journalists and politicians (only a few of whom are also scientists). This has clearly failed us as a society. Scientists, at all levels, need to be engaged in with community and in these discussions. Scientists need to be the go-to people on important scientific issues for the media. So consider my page my little part of getting scientists out there. I am so happy to see so many pages like mine that share cool science, answer questions, and debunk nonsense when we see it. I hope that we can continue to increase our visibility beyond our little corner of the internet.

However, I think the most important thing is for scientists to be more visible and relatable. I think a lot of

people think of scientists as a strange breed of nerdy people who are not like them. If people knew that scientists are just people, who happen to do science for a living, it would be harder to demonize scientists and dismiss what they have to say. To this end, I'm kicking off the #ScientistsArePeople campaign. Send this to every scientist you know and ask them to share something about themselves on Facebook or Twitter (or both!). It can be one thing or 10 things or 100 things. People need to know that scientists are just like them.

In support of this #ScientistsArePeople campaign:

My name is Alison Bernstein. For undergrad, I went to the University of Pennsylvania where I majored in the Biological Basis of Behavior and minored in the History and Sociology of Science. I started the Women's Club Tennis Team. I worked in a couple of labs and caught the research bug. Then, I went to graduate school at Washington University in St. Louis in the Division of Biological and Biomedical Sciences. I was officially in the Molecular Genetics and Genomics program, but my dissertation lab was in the Neuroscience program so I have a "mash up" of training. I met Daddy, PhD (a microbiologist and now science educator) during our interviews for grad school in the lobby of a Best Western and we got married in 2005. Our daughter was 9 months old when we defended our dissertations 10 days apart. Since finishing my PhD in 2009, I have been a postdoc at Emory University (except for 6 months that I spent at home with our daughter). I have training and expertise in cellular neuroscience, neurotoxicology, epigenetics and bioinformatics. Our son was born 3 weeks before my first grant was due. I got the grant. I have 11 peer-reviewed publications (Google Scholar will tell you 12, but one is my dissertation). I am passionate about science education and science outreach.

Here is how I'm a regular person:

- I'm a mom. I'm a wife. I'm a sister.
- I grew up in the suburbs of New York City.
- I have 2 cats.
- I play tennis.
- I love to cook.
- I traveled in Australia and New Zealand after college and was in Sydney for the 2000 Olympics. I worked as a waitress at a coffee shop on Macquarie St during the Olympics.
- I like to scrapbook (yes, really).
- I play piano (I used to be very good).
- I can play the flute too (I used to be very terrible).
- I love doing arts and crafts with my kids.
- Buffy the Vampire Slayer is my favorite TV show of all time. Grr argh.
- I'm not as organized as I think I am.
- I think unloading the dishwasher is the worst chore ever.
- I love chocolate. I love cheesecake. There are few desserts that are not chocolate or cheesecake that I deem "worth it". Sticky toffee pudding is one of them.

So that's me. I'm just a regular person. Not daunting or mysterious at all. If you or a loved one is a scientist, please share mundane or fascinating information with hashtag #ScientistsArePeople.

NOTE: This article was adapted from a blog, [here](#), on Kavin Senapathy's "[Skepchick](#)" site

Alison Bernstein is a scientist studying Parkinson's disease living in Atlanta with her husband, 2 kids and 2 cats. Follow her on her [Mommy PhD Facebook page](#) and on Twitter @mommyphd2.