VAI Success Story: Eli Bieri

VAI's Afterschool Cohort Alumni and Fulbright Scholar

From Science Cohort to Fulbright Scholar:

One Student's Journey with VAI

Van Andel Institute for Education (VAI) strives to foster a love of learning in every student who walks through our doors. Whether they join us for a field trip or attend one of VAI's Afterschool Cohorts, our mission is to teach them how to think and act like a scientist. So, it's incredibly rewarding when we hear how a former student has pursued their love of science and is using it to make a positive impact on the world...and that we helped contribute to that journey!

Small Questions and Big Wonders

Eli Bieri is a former Afterschool Cohort student who was recently awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to pursue work in amphibian conservation. A passionate scientist with boundless curiosity, Eli's fascination with science began at a very early age.

"I remember hearing toad calls when I was a little kid in the summertime from my back yard and I was just innately drawn to that noise." Eli recalled in a recent interview with VAI, "From then on, I spent so much free time just wading through ponds and swamps and looking for frogs and snakes or turtles. Anything I could get my hands on, really."

As he grew, Eli began searching for new ways to feed his inquisitive nature. When a family friend received a pamphlet on VAI's Student Programs, she immediately thought of Eli and passed the information on to his mother.

"Once we read up about it, we thought Eli would be a perfect fit." Said Gail Greco-Bieri, Eli's mother, "We are so grateful to her."

That small decision would ultimately set Eli on his trajectory toward a career in science and biology.

Thinking Like a Scientist

Following enrollment in VAI's Afterschool Cohort, Eli quickly realized he'd found a place where his curious energy could be channeled into something productive and fun. Cohorts are designed around hands-on investigations where students ask questions, investigate, and discover answers using scientific tools and resources. Adding to the excitement was the fact that VAI's science labs were filled with many of the same reptiles and amphibians Eli had often searched for in his backyard.

It was through these programs that Eli first began to think of himself as a real scientist. The VAI instructors encouraged all students to adopt a new mindset when it came to learning. Instead of training with facts and memorization, students were urged to ask questions, form hypotheses, and test their ideas to determine the truth. This inquiry-based approach not only fostered a love of learning within students, it also taught Eli that being a scientist had nothing to do with age.

"I remember I was doing this project where I was testing what effect common pesticides or herbicides would have on African Clawed Frogs. What I really loved about that project was that I felt like the instructor at the time really treated me like a scientist. I never felt as though he was training the kids to one day be scientists. He was like, 'You ARE scientists! You're doing science!' That's the kind of thinking that translates into a career in science and I'm really grateful for that."

New opportunities for learning continued to present themselves as Eli grew. At Grandville High School, he worked with his teacher, Kevin Randall, as part of a Sustainability Club. Later, he would meet professors in college who showed him the possibilities for a career in science. In the end, VAI was just the first of many teachers who would go on to inspire Eli to pursue his passion for herpetology.

New Horizons

These days, Eli finds himself preparing for his exciting new venture as a Fulbright Scholar. A Cultural Exchange Program funded by both the U.S. State Department and Australian government, the Fulbright Program is designed to foster academic and inter-cultural relations between countries. The process calls for a battery of essay submissions, interviews, investigations into an applicant's prior job experience, and even then, selection is not guaranteed. Competition for placement is fierce as anyone from students to scholars and even artists can receive grants to study or conduct research abroad.

"One of the things they are really looking for is this cross-cultural exchange in the application process." Eli explained during our interview. "You really have to demonstrate how you'll collaborate through cultural barriers. It was actually a really fun thing for me because collaboration through science is something I strive to do."

For Eli, the Fulbright Scholarship meant the chance to participate in a two-year Masters program at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. There, he'll be working with Dr. Jodi Rowley to study how aggressive wildfire suppression may be having a negative impact on the country's amphibian population. Along with the danger of massive wildfires like those seen in 2020, Eli suspects that the absence of small, natural burns is causing amphibians to lose important microhabitats. This makes them far more susceptible to disease. The two hope their research will lead to better, more sustainable practices for both humans and amphibians alike.

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Looking Forward

When asked where he sees himself in the future, Eli was enthusiastic about his desire to one day work at the intersection of land management and public policy. Just two summers ago he worked for the US Forest Service in California on a crew that was surveying endangered frogs.

"My bosses title was 'Amphibian Biologist for the US Forest Service'." Eli recalled with a grin. "That seems like a dream job. The experience was so fun, and I felt like I had to pinch myself every day. I was getting paid to go out with nets and catch frogs in the mountains. I could really see myself working in the Forest or Parks service."

It's clear that Eli's science adventure is only just getting started. For now, though, his story is a reminder to everyone about the importance of early education. VAI has always believed that students hold the greatest potential for growth, discovery, and positive change. By teaching them to think and act like scientists, we share a mindset that they're able to carry with them far beyond the walls of any classroom. It teaches students to stay curious, creative, and critical in their learning, and to apply these qualities to whatever passion drives them.

"VAI had a significant impact on Eli's natural curiosity." Remarked Gail Greco-Bieri at the close of our interview. "It was the spark that lit the fire for him to validate the 'why's' he thought about and he continues to question today. VAI taught Eli to think like a scientist and he's not stopped ever since."

It's touching to think that Eli's long road to Australia began in the science labs of Van Andel Institute for Education, and we're honored to have played a small role in a much greater story. By supporting students through engaging programs and thoughtful projects, and helping teachers incorporate inquiry into their practices, we hope to create more positive experiences for students like Eli. Regardless of whether their interests lie in science, technology, engineering, or math, VAI is committed to building those spaces where children can pursue knowledge with curiosity and wonder. After all, it's these moments which foster a lifetime love of learning in students and inspire all of us to pursue that learning together.

Want to learn more about VAI's Afterschool Cohort or other programs for students?

Visit www.vaei.org or call 616.234.5528.

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