

Introduction: My name is Ellen Gabler. I'm an Investigative Reporter for *The New York Times* and I graduated from Emory in 2003. I was in the business school and a journalism co-major.

Question 1: Can you tell us a little bit about your journey (and where your headspace was at) from graduation to your current role?

Response: When I came to Emory, I had really no idea what I wanted to do with my life. And even when I graduated from Emory, I didn't really know what I wanted to do. So I was in the business school, and I had a marketing concentration, but I'd also done a journalism co-major, but I feel like I kind of felt pressure to kind of do something more traditional like a lot of my classmates were doing. And so when I graduated, I was checking out, you know, marketing jobs at some nonprofits because I knew I wasn't really cut out for the corporate world. And so when I graduated, I was kind of like journalism, marketing, journalism, marketing, and I did an internship at this really cool nonprofit in Washington, DC, a marketing internship. It was a great organization. But I definitely learned that I was not interested in doing marketing or communications. And so after that experience, I decided to pursue journalism, a reporting job. I was really nervous about it. I didn't have as good of an experience as other students who had come out of Emory's journalism school. I just wasn't really that into journalism when I was at Emory. So I hadn't done any, you know, like big internships or anything like that. So I was kind of behind. I think the thing that's been the most surprising to me about my career is: 'It's really not where you came from, right?'. Because I started with pretty limited journalism experience. But it's kind of where you decide to go, right, and the connections you make along the way, and the mentors you find, and also really just your own desire to kind of follow your own path. One of the big influences on me, when I was at Emory, I had this one journalism professor who taught journalism ethics class and narrative nonfiction writing. And looking back, I really, really enjoyed those classes. And comparing my interest in those classes to my interest in my business school classes, thinking back now, I was so much more inspired by those classes. And so I think that's really something to pay attention to, right. And, you know, I was doing my business school stuff because I had to. And actually, that did end up being useful. But I think if I had paid a little bit more attention to what really inspires me instead of worrying about the practical path, I might not have been so unsure of what I was doing.

So my first job was at this really small newspaper and I covered city council meetings, cops and courts, all this weird, crazy stuff happening in this small town. And I'd been there for like 10 months. Remember, I was getting paid like no money. And I got a call from a business newspaper in the Twin Cities in Minneapolis. And they were interested in me because of my business degree from Emory. And I had applied to an internship there and they never called me about it, but they'd saved my resume. And so this was 10 months later, they called me, "Hey, we saved your resume, we have an opening for a full time reporter, would you like to come here and be a business reporter, you know, covering Target Corporation, Best Buy and all this other stuff?" And my first reaction was, like, *that's so boring, I have no interest in doing that*. And I was kind of hesitant because I was really kind of liking things at the *Stillwater Gazette*. But to be honest, they were gonna pay me like 10,000 more dollars, which was a lot, right. And I kind of knew my time at the *Stillwater Gazette* was going to be limited in just sort of how I wanted to grow as a journalist. So I agreed to do it. And so that was my second job at the *Minneapolis St.*

Paul Business Journal. It ended up being really wonderful. I had great editors, I learned some of the skills as a journalist that I still use today. And it was one of those things that, you know, I didn't think I was necessarily super interested in it. But I kept an open mind. And then I really took advantage of all the things I could learn there. And I was there for about two years before I decided I kind of needed a new challenge. And so that's another thing to remember. And I know I'm guilty of this kind of thinking that you make this decision, and like that's the rest of your life. Well, that's just not true. So my first job, I was there for 10 months. My second job, I was there for two years. You know, it kind of goes on from there. And so just because you make one decision, doesn't mean that you have to do that for the rest of your life, or even for the next five years. It's important to kind of be flexible, and kind of always be checking in with yourself. And also, you know, take advantage of the situation you're in to learn as much as you can from them.

Mentors have been extremely important to me throughout the course of my career, probably one of the most important things. I had a number of really great mentors at Emory that I stayed in touch with, as I mentioned, that journalism professor Catherine Manegold was a really big influence on me. At the same time, there was my advisor at the business school, Andrea Hershatter, was also a really big influence on me, in that she kind of understood that this normal B-school path probably wasn't for me. And I really appreciated that. And, you know, over the years, I've stayed in very close contact with Professor Manegold and then, you know, various mentors and editors throughout my career and so that has definitely been probably the biggest boost to my career. You know, forget about where you went to school, where you hit internships, whatever. Of course, those things are important and they can help you but finding the right mentors that will help you and inspire you is really important.

Question 2: What does creativity and living a creative life mean to you?

Response: To me, being creative in your career kind of means taking whatever inspires you and applying it to the world to help other people, interest other people, inspire other people. And one of the really cool things about being a journalist is I get to learn about what a lot of other people are doing. And I just think it's so cool how there are so many people in the world who are so passionate about these different things, right. And listen, you don't have to be a teacher or a nurse or a doctor or a social worker to save the world. There are so many great things you can do and so many ways that you can put your creativity and your passions into action, into your career, to really make a difference and really do interesting, important work. So you know, to me, it's not about like, I don't know, becoming a painter or an artist or whatever, like doing theater or something like that. There's so much creativity out there in the world, in business and in science. I do think what it takes a little bit, though, is to not necessarily follow the same path that everybody else is doing. And that's hard. It's definitely hard. But I actually think people are getting better at it. And I think it's more accepted, which is great.

When I was a senior at Emory, my grandma gave me a book and it was called *What Should I Do With My Life?* And it sounds like a self-help book, but it's not really. But it's by this guy, Poe Bronson, and it was little stories about how all these people figured out what they were going to do with their lives and the journey, like how they got there. I remember reading the story of this one woman, she wanted to embark on this, like, new thing, right? And she was talking with one

of her coworkers, and was like, *"I really want to do this thing"*. And her coworker's like, *"Oh, yeah, you know, like, 10 years ago, I really wanted to do this, like one thing that was, you know, kind of off the beaten path."* And this woman was like, *"Why didn't you do it?"* Her coworker was like, *"Well, I would have, but I bought a couch."* And, you know, basically, this woman was going to get rid of all of her furniture and move to London or something. But she's like, *"I would have done it. But like, I bought this new couch, like whatever."* And so the woman who was telling the story was like, *"I just always kept that in the back of my head. I didn't want to be the person who was like, 'I would have followed my dream, but I bought a couch, right?'"* And so you're going to extrapolate this out to you know, whatever, like, *Oh, I would have become a journalist but I went to law school.* That kind of resonated with me. And I do think you have to take chances. And I think you have to have the courage to do that. And I think you have to, you know, understand that it might not go as you plan but that's okay. It's okay to fail, it's okay to change directions, and it's okay to do different things to explore who you want to be and what you want to do.

Question 3: What were things that were unplanned/unexpected but meaningful to your growth?

Response: Part of pursuing a creative career, I think, is taking some chances along the way. And, you know, I've had a number of points in my life where I've had to make a decision, right. And I've had to, like, take a chance on something that wasn't even the normal path in journalism. And I'd be lying if I said it wasn't a struggle. And I've really agonized over some of these decisions, like a lot. My friends and family can confirm that. But I think what is important to do and to remember is to think, for me anyway, *Will I regret this if I don't do this thing? Will I regret this moment, if I don't take this chance?* Because, you know, taking chances is scary. And a lot of the decisions that I've made, I've been scared. And that's normal. And that doesn't mean you shouldn't do it. It also doesn't mean you should do it. But like, you kind of have to think through it. And so for me, when I decided after I graduated from Emory and I was kind of on these two tracks like marketing/business or law school or journalism. I remember very vividly thinking to myself, *This journalism thing is a chance. But if I don't do it, 10 years from now, I'm going to regret this.* And that is what pushed me to take that \$12 an hour job at the *Stillwater Gazette*. I was like, *Oh, I don't want to have a quarter life crisis and regret this.* So I was like, I'm going to take that chance. That turned out to be really great for me. Another time, I had a similar sort of chance. I'd been a reporter for three years and I decided I wanted to go to grad school and learn more about investigative reporting because I wanted to become an investigative reporter. And I told the people I was working with at the time, the editor and publisher, and the publisher was very discouraging to me. And I'll never forget it. She said, *"You know, Ellen, you're not curious enough to be an investigative reporter. And you haven't done any investigation so far. So like, I don't think you should go to Columbia's graduate school. You know, I think he should stay here."* She wasn't trying to be mean, but, you know, I just disagreed with her. So like, there are times that we want to listen to people who are our mentors and then there are times when you don't have to listen to them. And I remember being like, *Whatever, lady, I'm 25 years old. First of all, you don't know how curious I am. Secondly, of course, I haven't done any investigations. I've only been a reporter for three years, like, what are you*

talking about? So that was, you know, some advice from a mentor of sorts that I didn't listen to. And I took the chance and I went to grad school anyway.

One of the most impactful moments or experiences of my life was working as a reporter at the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. I had excellent editors and mentors there. I left there, went to the *Chicago Tribune* for a couple years, but then decided I wanted to go back to Milwaukee. And, you know, that was kind of a decision that a lot of people I think questioned, right. Not a lot of reporters go from a bigger paper back to a smaller paper. And you know, it again, it was something, it was a chance, it was taking a chance that I kind of struggled with a little bit. But I remember thinking like, *You know what, these folks in Milwaukee, they are the kind of journalists I want to be like.* And so, to me, it felt right to me to go back there and to learn from them a bit more. And I think if I hadn't gone back to Milwaukee—I stayed there for five more years after I went back—if I had not gone back to Milwaukee, I don't think I would be an investigative reporter at *The New York Times*. And so it's kind of trusting yourself, and listening to yourself in those situations, and understanding kind of what you need.

Question 4: What advice do you have for your younger self?

Response: I think we can sometimes get really hung up on where we came from or comparing ourselves to our peers. And in my experience, it's really just better to focus on yourself and focus on what you want in your own path. Because it really actually doesn't matter what other people are doing. And what I've found is, you know, people that I went to college with who were up here when it came to journalism when I was kind of down here, you know, everything kind of evens out. To me, it's less of a competition and it's more of figuring out what is right for you. And that's actually really how you end up being successful and fulfilled in your career. So I think that's a really important thing to remember.

I think it's really important to keep an open mind to career paths. So this is gonna sound stupid, but I didn't really know that, being a journalist was a career path. I mean, obviously, I knew it, right. But I don't think it was really something I had considered. And then at Emory, I was on the swim team and so I wasn't part of the student newspaper or anything like that. So that part of journalism I was kind of cut off from. And so luckily, I just happened to take a journalism class my freshman year and I was better at it than I was at other things so I was like, *Oh, maybe I should do that again.* So that's kind of how my interest started to build. But I think it's really important to try to have an open mind, especially coming into a place like Emory where there's so many things that you might be exposed to. And so, you know, I come from a family of a number of lawyers, right. I said I was considering going to law school. And for some people, going to law school is a really good thing and they should absolutely do that. For me, it would have kind of been like a fear-based decision, I think, because it was the thing I knew. And for me, that would not have been the right decision. I don't think I would have been happy doing that. And so I think it's really important to take the opportunity that a place like Emory gives you to open your mind to all these different things. And you don't know what's going to inspire you.

The other thing is to take advantage of various opportunities, because you really have no idea where they're going to lead. I did a really small internship magazine in Atlanta called *Creative*

Loafing. I didn't really do that much important stuff, but it was like a small little experience that kind of gave me a taste of what I could do as a journalist. So even little experiences like that here and there can really end up having a big effect on you. And so that's why I think it's good to kind of open your mind and do a lot of different things. And eventually, it kind of all shapes into place.

Looking back, my career seems to kind of make sense. Along the way, it sort of looks smooth, but I was there for it—it wasn't. It was fraught, it was filled with doubt and worry, a lot of positive stuff, excitement, a lot of fun. But it was definitely a struggle. But I think if you just know that and understand, listen, this isn't gonna be easy, but it's gonna be cool. And it's gonna be exciting. And it's worth that struggle.

The other thing I want to mention is money. I think people sometimes think entering a more creative field that you're gonna be this starving artist or whatever. And, you know, maybe that's true, but I don't think that that's right. And I do think following your passion, and being inspired by what you do, lead you to success, which leads you to a more lucrative career. And listen, I wake up every day, and I'm truly excited about my job. That doesn't mean it's not a pain. That doesn't mean I'm like, *ugh I can't believe I have to do X, Y, Z.* But overall, I'm extremely inspired by my career. And that is a way better way to live than making like 50,000 more dollars or 100,000 more dollars, like who even cares, right. So I think that's another really important thing to keep in mind.

You're really the only person who knows what's going to inspire you. And so you have to try to pay attention to that as much as you can and not be distracted. One of the things that has kept me going over the years from the beginning of my career to the middle to now is being able to enjoy what I was doing in the moment, but also understanding that I wanted to get better and kind of constantly pursuing what I wanted to get better at. So for me, I started out as a regular reporter, I really didn't know anything. I kind of kept learning and really wanted to be an investigative reporter. And so I was really focused on the work I was doing and was excited about it, but I knew I could be better. I knew I could learn data analysis skills, I knew I could be better at building sources. And what really worked well for me is I'm so interested in journalism and doing these different things that learning data analysis skills or thinking about how to build sources better and get people to trust me and ask better questions, that was fun for me. And so that's really kind of what kept spurring me along, right? Because I was like, *ooh, wait a minute, I'm actually kind of getting good at this. And I'm like, ooh, but I'm still really bad at this thing. I'm like, okay, cool, well I can get better at that.* And so that's what was helpful to me. It was always like I was able to enjoy something in the moment, but also have something to kind of look forward to to improve myself.

Emory is such a wonderful place. And college is such a cool time. And so remember to take advantage of the people and the resources and all the opportunities you have when you're there because it really is a special place and a special time in your life.