

Introduction: Hi, my name is Lillian Ciardelli. I graduated in 2010 from Emory and 2016 from the master's program at Hunter. My major was psychology with a focus on animal behavior. And I am currently part owner of a business called Behave Atlanta, which is an animal behavior and consulting business for pet dogs and cats, and really anything if you have a different species. But primarily we work with them.

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

Response: When I was at Emory, I was in the psychology department working with primarily animals and animal behavior because I had at that point figured out that it really wasn't biology that I wanted to work in, it was psychology and kind of studying animals and why they do what they do and less how the body works and things like that. When I graduated from Emory, I did a ten-day field course in Arizona. And the idea was to kind of give people an overview of the different fields of animal behavior. My favorite portion was somebody who worked with animals in the film industry, but not in a way that you would think. So he wasn't necessarily training like cats or wolves or something, but he was building structures that you could use during film sets to film ants through underground, he was painting fish to use in advertisements so that it would look like there was a live fish there, or he'd be training insects to move throughout a film set in a specific way. So it was really kind of this creative and exciting job that was very lucrative for this person, but also really hadn't even occurred to me as an option for animal behavior. But of course it is because you need to understand how these animals work, how they move, and then bringing that into a more applied setting. So that program was actually through Hunter College. And I ended up deciding to go there for my Master's in animal behavior and conservation.

Before I actually made that decision, I did stay in Atlanta. And I sort of tested a lot of things out. So I knew I wanted to work with animals. But I knew I didn't want to be a vet. Because, again, I just wasn't totally interested in biology and medicine. Or one time or another between the two years that I took between undergrad and grad school, I worked at Zoo Atlanta as an intern and I was also a kickboxing instructor. So things are kind of all over the place. But one of the things I loved the most at Zoo Atlanta was building enrichment for the animals. So that kind of means puzzles, constructing their enclosures so that they're realistic and not only look appropriate for the animal, but allow the animal to exhibit species-specific behavior. So that was kind of like a very fun thing for me to do because I was building, I was thinking, I was creating puzzles, and just in some ways decorating, I guess. But in a way that felt like it was helping an animal and not just for my own entertainment. And that and the research end of things, I really loved interacting with animals on a one-on-one basis. And was pretty interested in the questions being asked, but almost was more interested in kind of their care. So I wanted to stay late and feed the animals. I wanted to kind of get the kind of one-on-one interaction. So I decided at that point to pursue an applied animal behavior degree, which means you're kind of doing this animal behavior research, but you're affecting individuals, you're applying it to day-to-day lives. So in order to get that, I needed a master's in animal behavior. And so then I started looking for grad schools and places that would provide that for me. And Hunter, where I had done this 10-day field research trip, provided kind of everything I wanted, so I went there. And in that grad program, I was again able to try out kind of different areas of animal behavior.

It is a long and winding journey. But during that time, I spent a lot of time behind the computer. So I ended up doing a lot of math. Now I'm not a math person. So that was another time where I found

myself doing something that I wasn't interested in. So I knew I wanted to work with animals, I specifically did not get into a field that I would have associated with math, which would have been accounting or finance or something. But then here I am, sitting behind a computer crunching numbers. So I realized, okay, this is not... within the animal field, this is not where I want to be. I'm not enjoying it. Plenty of people are because that's kind of what science is. It's just sitting there and looking at the numbers and being able to make these amazing conclusions. And I was not into it. So I did another couple of field research trips through Hunter. I was able to work with dolphins and see their personality. And so I got to kind of do a little bit more hands on there and whittle down my interests more. So there I felt, *Okay, I really do like the field research. But I wonder if this is something that I could actually do on a regular basis.*

So when I graduated, I decided I wanted to go into the field and try out some more remote jobs. And at this point, I had already realized that I liked working with animals in captivity to improve their lives and mental welfare. So that was basically like an animal that's in a sanctuary, an animal that's in a zoo, or even an animal that's in a home—how can we make their lives better through better understanding their behavior and through kind of creative development. So I then went to Australia, and did a couple of different volunteer stints with different species and realized I love that. I love volunteering at rehabilitation centers. So fun and so fun to do it from a perspective of improving their lives while they're there. So I was like, *Can I build this? Can I give this to this animal? Like, What can I do that's going to be species appropriate, help them get rehabilitated and out into the world. And also kind of is just fun and exciting and novel objects for them.* So I did a lot of that, but simultaneously realized, I do like cities and humans and I cannot live in the woods by myself, where a lot of these rehab centers are. They tend to be more remote because that's where you want to be to keep animals calm and happy in their environment. So I came back and worked for a little while in Boston as a behavior consultant. So that was kind of the more applied day-to-day level, where you're going to talk to clients and find out what's going on with their animal and okay, how can we kind of meet in the middle here? What is your animal trying to do? How can we change things up so that they know a) what they're allowed to do and what they're not? And b) Can we make your home more appropriate for them? Is there anything we can change? So that's another place where creativity gets to be utilized where I'm like, *Okay, let's build a cat tree. Or let's see if you can use a cat shelf here to make your cat happier.*

At the same time, I was struggling to understand some of the timelines and development of dogs and kind of keeping things straight in my head. So I made this little timeline for myself thinking, *Okay, this will just be an easier thing for me to check out when I'm trying to tell somebody where their dog is developmentally.* And I showed it to some of my friends and they said, *You should publish this. It's super helpful.* So then I went to another friend who was also a graduate of Emory and he went into environmental science. He started a job creating infographics. And we worked together to create this infographic that we now use and sell as part of our business that helps people understand the timeline of dog behavioral development. And when you get a puppy, *Okay, you're here, this is kind of what to expect, things like that for the first year and a half of life.* So I was so excited about that, because I felt like, *Oh, my gosh, this is animal behavior. But it's also art and it's also helpful.* So kind of everything I wanted to do.

Then I got cold in Boston and decided I wanted to move back to Atlanta, where I really had a great community—loved Emory, loved the swim team—and tried to figure out if there was a way I could start a

business like this here. And luckily for me, a friend from Boston also was moving here and actually had just moved and was a dog trainer with so much experience. And we decided to kind of link up. And when we talked over the phone, we just had really complimentary skills, like when we were developing how we wanted our business to work, where she'd run a dog training and walking business for over 10 years in Boston. And so she has great business savvy—I kind of missed that lesson. But I'm very into social media and creativity. And so she was like, *I don't really care about that*. And I was like, *Great, because all I want to do is make posts about animals all day*. And so that was another way for me to, at this point, create a job for myself that allowed me to do what I want to do, which is help animals and post photographs, post infographics, design things.

And then the last part that I kind of forgot to add in is I do try to still participate when I can and volunteer at rehab centers, just more local ones or like any Wildlife Center to kind of get my hands in with some wildlife. And when I'm there, I also really enjoyed helping them with their social media or creating stories kind of around these animals because I found that everyone was so engaged and cares about these species they didn't know anything about when you can present it to them in kind of fun and creative ways, and not always such an academic or kind of, unfortunately, depressing ways. Because unfortunately, the animal field can be really depressing because there's a lot of sad things going on environmentally. But that doesn't mean that is the best way to get people to help and that is the best way to motivate anyone. So that's another thing I really enjoy, is kind of looking at a situation figuring out how can we change people's behavior to help an animal? And what's an artistic way I can do that?

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

Response: It's being willing to experiment and try different things. And so I would say even if you do not include the typical creative pursuits that I'm interested in—so painting and graphic design—being creative in terms of finding a solution for somebody, I would consider, probably, most consulting businesses creative. To be honest, I actually don't know much about other consulting. But I like the fact that when we get a client, even though we have a certain number of very typical responses or solutions to their problem, we only are going to recommend what fits their unique circumstance. And often we have to be creative because, for example, a classic creative situation is: somebody in a single apartment with two cats and only one litter box. It's like they're having litter box issues. How can you make this space work for you? What type of creative solutions? Can you build a discrete litter box? Can we build more vertical space? What's going to work for somebody? Because people have different needs and different requirements, I guess, so we are really into customizing things not because we want everybody to have their special perfect thing, but because if you don't make something work for somebody, they're not going to do it. And our bottom line is to help the animal. So if I look at somebody and they're super design-oriented, and I say, *Put three litter boxes in your house*. Or, *put another scratching post, your cat has nothing to do all day*. I need to make sure that I give them attractive options and things that are really going to motivate them. So that's what creativity means to me.

And then in terms of creative exploration, I guess, sort of the same thing. Or just seeing different ways that you can communicate your message to people. So I spend a lot of time on Instagram and making different messages and trying to think about what words do I need to be the most prominent or like what's the best medium to send this message and that I can hit the most people?

So I am very interested in art, specifically photography. I like watercolor painting. I really actually enjoy anything that is building something or making something. But photography, especially. I guess I would say I'm an avid amateur photographer. I took one photography class in high school and I never was driven to take it in college, but it's a very approachable discipline, I guess. Or art. So I got more into it. I've always had a camera around at parties and stuff, but I certainly got more into always having one, like take a picture of a flower or something like that. And then in grad school when I made the choice to travel a little bit, I decided to get a nicer camera. And I wanted to take good pictures of monkeys in Japan. I knew monkeys are going to be far away and my camera is not good enough, how do I do this? So I took a Groupon class in New York just in my free time so I could learn how to use my new camera. It was amazing. I recommend JP Teaches Photo. But then I saw I took all those photos and then I thought like, *What am I going to do with them?* And so at first I thought like, *I'll just post them all on my Facebook and everybody will think it's so cool.* And then I thought, *Well, maybe I should just make a separate blog and then talk about my trip. And then people can look at it if they want to.* And so that was step one. And then step two was the same Emory friend, who is the one who did the infographics, he, at the time, was doing a blog, *One World, Two Feet*, which was sort of a travel blog for traveling environmentally friendly. And he asked if I wanted to contribute. So I thought, *Okay, I'll give some of my photos.* And then I'll steer some of my captions more about behavior and try to make sure that I'm sending the right message. Because that was another thing I found: the whole time I was planning any trip, I was like, *Okay, I need to do eco-friendly tourism, I don't want to be the tourists that's going that I've read about in all my classes, which is accidentally promoting the wrong industries.* So I have a post about elephants, where I kind of had an elephant researcher that I reached out to that I had worked with in school and kind of was like, *What's a good place.* And he told me, and then I did a whole post with my favorite photos about what to look for and what to avoid if you're going to do that type of thing. So that's where I kind of started my writing and blogging and found, I guess, my voice, which is very conversational. I wanted it to be funny and I wanted it to be me. And I wanted people to read it. And then not subliminally message them to do the right thing. But I didn't want it to be like, *This is the horrors of elephant management trafficking.* I wanted it to be that you're probably going to want to do this and here's what to do. I'm gonna tell you what to do not and what not to do, and not just say you did the wrong thing and punish you for it. So I did that for a while trying to write posts that kind of sent a very positive and funny environmental message that was able to use my photography. The painting and drawing I just did in my spare time for a while. And it's still pretty much that quarantine has certainly given me more time to work on that. When I'm taking photos of dogs or cats or any animal and I'm looking for something in particular. Like I want their personality to shine through. I don't want this to just look like a cat or a dog, I want them to be doing something that, to me, is a little bit more interesting and like you can feel a connection with this animal.

Question 3: Reflecting on your journey from graduation to now, what were things that were unplanned/unexpected but meaningful to your growth?

Response: One of them, I guess, was that I actually thought I was going to apply to the neuroscience and behavioral biology program at Emory. And I interviewed with some professors, I got all the way to writing my application letter, and I just couldn't get it right. Like I looked at a friend who actually did end up going to that program and I looked at her letter. And when I read her letter, I was like, *This is*

why mine is so bad, because I don't want to do it. I just couldn't say, I'm looking forward to teaching in the classroom. I'm looking forward to doing all these things, because I didn't want to do it. And so that was one sort of roadblock or a turning point where I thought, Why am I (not lying), but I don't want to have to pitch something I just don't have the feeling behind. When I found other programs like the program at Hunter, and then there was another program at Tufts that I applied to where I was writing those essays and I just felt so passionate, and it was so easy. Because I really did want to do what I believed those programs would help me do. So that was one decision that really steered me in one direction.

Another thing that is really crazy is when I was in New York. I had just moved to New York with my best friend—that's where Hunter is—and she also just took a job there luckily, so we're Emory for life buddies. But she and I couldn't figure out the subway and we're standing at the platform trying to figure out which train was which. And so she reached out to tap this woman and I was like, *Don't talk to strangers. What are you doing?* And she tapped her and said, *Do you know where this train is going?* And the woman said, *Yes.* And so we got on with her. She was a veterinary behaviorist that actually lived in Chicago, her son lived in New York. And so she basically did the veterinary version of what I wanted to do. And she gave me her business card and was like, *Contact me anytime.* And so honestly, throughout the process, I would email her and say, like, *I'm really interested in this, what do you think about it.* And she would send me reading suggestions, she would kind of tell me. And then I had a conference in Chicago. I ended up going a day early to stay with her, like a random stranger in the subway. But I had googled her and she was a real veterinarian. And so she invited me to basically her farm and gave me a private lesson on some animal behavior training and management, and essentially became a mentor and still is. And we would talk every time she came to New York to visit her son. And she kind of helped me and she steered me kind of in the educational direction. *So you want to look for this. And then these types of people are out there, this is how you should do what you want to do.* And it was so helpful to me to have somebody that I could just ask because it's not easy. Even now, behavior and veterinary medicine together are kind of a new field. Like there's not that many veterinary behaviorists. And so she was amazing. And I can't believe that... I don't know where I would be if my friend had listened to me and not touched a stranger. So that was one.

When I moved to Boston, I was trying to work in dog training and kind of figure out who to talk to, who to reach out to and where to start. And it can be really hard. I'm okay at networking, but I'm not great. Somebody told me there was something called Somerville Dog Fest. I think one of the people I interviewed with said that it was basically a dog festival in a park where trainers are there, vendors are there, and you can volunteer. So I volunteered that day and got put on a team with somebody who I didn't know, but my job was to kind of monitor a station, make sure dogs weren't fighting, and help people get in line. And then later in the year, one of the trainers I had been planning to shadow with fell through and I kind of was like, *Oh no, everything I tried fell through.* At that point, I had wanted to shadow with a veterinary behaviorist and she had told me she was too busy right now to take on somebody. The person who I was supposed to be shadowing in person ended up losing her lease on the space, so I couldn't shadow her. And I was like, *Everything I tried didn't work.* But I looked back at what trainers were available and I saw that one of the ones in the area was the person I actually had been matched with at the festival. And I was like, *I was in your group, do you have any options for me?* And she said, *You can shadow me, I can't pay you that much. But if you want to get experience, I'll pay you when I can.* And I was like, *Yes, great.* So I followed her. And I apprenticed with her for about

a year. And she's, again, another person I will still reach out to when I have a question or something. She was so useful and helpful. And it wasn't a fluke, like I definitely purposefully went to the training festival, but it was lucky that I had been put in her group and so it has basically trained me to kind of just try a lot of things because you never know in the end what will work out and who will end up helping you. So kind of keeping business cards, keeping connections, and just staying open and not, I guess giving up. And I don't want to say like, *When one door closes, another one will open*. But kind of! It did happen for me, like I have run into so many roadblocks and then just tried a different avenue and found a workaround that ended up really, really helping me out.

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

Response: You can always try again and you can always start over. Really important, because people feel a lot of pressure in college to know what they're supposed to do. I do use my major. Some people don't. But I would say it's very unlikely that your major is not helpful in some way, shape, or form, especially considering the interdisciplinary field that I am in now. I use plenty of things that were my major and were not, and I'm so grateful that I studied what I did. So that's one thing is that you can always go back into classes, you can always go back and focus on that thing that you didn't care about at the time, but you care now about. Because that's when it will sink in better and when you'll learn more, is when you're actually interested and motivated. And so if you're not interested in it in college, focus on what you're interested in and kind of change your focus as your interest changes. It's just always time to make a career pivot, especially in my field. Many people in my grad program were people who changed careers. I was one of the few that kind of at least had a goal of staying with animals. Many people decided they wanted to work with animals after they spent an entire career in finance or something. So that's one: you always change your mind.

There's what you're interested in and then there's what you're very good at. And sometimes those things do not overlap or they don't overlap in the classic industry that you think. So for me, I am very good at school. Like I will say I love taking tests. I love studying for things. I'm pretty risk averse. And to be honest, in my field, if you have to work with aggressive reactive dogs, it's difficult to be around jumpy dogs for me all day. I love helping them, it is what I have chosen to do, but in terms of my behavior and skill set, I'm actually kind of working against the grain a little bit and having to train myself to not react the way that my body just reacts. Like, I'm just jumpy as a person. And even if my brain is like, *This is fine, I don't care and my body jumps*. I'm like, to the client, *Sorry, sorry, this is just what I do. I'm not scared. It's just, this is who I am*. So that's one aspect is like, *Okay, I knew this is gonna be hard for me*. So I'm kind of understanding that this is not at all a book work. I know exactly what to do with this animal. But when you put me face-to-face with it, that's where I needed more experience and more training.

But then there are the things that I'm really good at. I love talking to people, I love doing creative things. I love drawing, painting. I love, sort of, social media. And so I found a way to make those things work together and I found a way. I found a job where my skill set is important because there are plenty of people who work with animals because they don't like people. But then if that person becomes a dog trainer, and they're trying to tell you what to do and they are not nice to you, it's really hard to want to listen to them. So I would say, try to think about those things. And I'm sure plenty of career advisors do

this, where it's like, *What are your best skills?* But it didn't occur to me that academia and my skill set of being a good bookworm did not match with what I actually kind of enjoyed doing, which was not being a bookworm. So, I guess just focus on... try to keep those things in mind and it's like, *Hey, it might get really draining if you put yourself in a position that is difficult for you on a day-to-day basis.* So make sure it's balanced, make sure you are focused on things you love at the same time so that you can feel good and not feel like you're constantly trying to put yourself in uncomfortable situations.

Not everything has to be a career. You can do it as part of your career, you can adapt to it, or you can just do it in your free time. There's a reason people have hobbies because they're enjoyable. So that took me a while to accept that, *Is this what I'm gonna do forever?* And it's, *No, you maybe just do it on the side, because it's fun.* There's never wasted time. If you go down the wrong road, it's still not a waste, because it will still help you.