You can major in geology?
I went to Queen’s University, Canada, planning on using a double major in biology and physics to somehow have a career making prosthetics. I thought engineers worked on trains. Obviously I had not done much in the way of research for my career path, but how many of us really know what we want to do and how to achieve that goal straight out of high school? I was lucky to have landed in a dorm only two doors away from Hilary Corlett, a geology major, and the girl who would become my closest friend and lab partner throughout my undergraduate degree. During my first semester in university I was so bored in my biology class, I couldn’t bear the thought of taking part 2 the following semester and I steadfastly refused to register for it. I needed another class to fill my schedule and Hilary suggested geology. Despite having been friends for a couple of months, we somehow had not shared our majors with each other yet. I was surprised: “Geology? As in rocks? There are classes in that?” Hilary replied, laughing, “There’s whole majors in that.”

Wait – what do I do now?
It was the 2004-2005 winter when it suddenly dawned on me that once I defended my master’s thesis I would need to have some sort of job. I had done my
masters research on an unusual occurrence of precious metals, which set me up for employment in the mining industry. This industry was, unfortunately, the same type of work that I determined was not right for me some years earlier when I had worked for the oil company. Lack of forethought strikes again!

One of other the graduate students in our shared office space was from the US, and he told me that I could teach at the community college level in the US with my masters. I applied to three community colleges in California, interviewed, and got a job offer in Bakersfield, California before I defended. I had plenty of TA experience, but I had never taught a whole class before. I had never designed curriculum. All I knew going in was what I loved and what I hated about my university experience. Above all else I wanted to do whatever I could to make sure my students enjoyed themselves, actually wanted to come to class, and hopefully learned something too. I organized two field trips each semester for my big classes, and quickly got a contingent of geophytes who couldn’t get enough geology field tripping – so they started a geology club.

The students fought for me.
I taught at Bakersfield College for six years and got tenure there before human resources incompetence and immigration issues tore into my blissfully carefree world. While I holed up in Canada waiting for a new work visa, unable to teach, and caught up in a situation where I couldn’t fulfil my contractual obligation for the school because the school hadn’t fulfilled their contractual obligation to immigration services- my students fought for me. They rallied, wrote letters, talked to the media, and showed me that my teaching had mattered. When I felt like I was in the depths of despair, six years of geology and Earth science students publicly shared their experiences in my classes and their successes that they credited to my teaching. They sent me photos from field trips they held in my honour and told me they missed me and they hoped I would be able to teach again soon. For the first time I knew that this was the career path for me, and I decided that I needed to earn my PhD in order to open the door to teaching opportunities in my country of citizenship.
In the summer of 2011, I started at Utah State University to earn a PhD in Geomorphology. Before my first month was up, my advisor (Joel Pederson) and I had agreed that I would do some component of my project on “something educationy”. The result was a set of three augmented reality field trip apps, and a whole new direction in geoscience education research. Upon completing my PhD, I went to work at California State University – Fullerton as the geoscience education faculty member in an incredible supportive, fun, and collaborative geology department.

I have just finished my third, and final, year at California State University – Fullerton and am now embarking on another new adventure at Quest University in Canada, where I am a citizen.

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Geology Club students making a “human mudcrack” near Fossil Falls, California. One of the photos sent to me while I was in “exile”. (Photo Credit: Sirahuen Martinez).