

2012 MEDALS & AWARDS

SUBARU OUTSTANDING WOMAN IN SCIENCE AWARD

Presented to
Phoebe A. Cohen



Phoebe A. Cohen
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Citation by Warren D. Allmon

Very occasionally a young person comes along who truly stands out, who has the right combination of intelligence, creativity, motivation, and enthusiasm to give them extremely high potential to contribute to your field – in my case paleobiology. I have not met many of these in my 20 year career – perhaps 3 or 4. Phoebe Cohen is one of them. She is one of the most extraordinary young people I have ever met, with the potential to rank among the very best in our field.

Phoebe was an undergraduate student in two classes that I taught at Cornell. She then approached me about sitting in on my graduate student seminar during her senior spring semester. After graduation I hired her as my assistant, a position she filled for two years before going to graduate school. During her time in grad school at Harvard we stayed in fairly regular contact. In addition to having dinner at GSA meeting every year, I usually asked her for the latest information in her specialty of late Proterozoic paleontology to

integrate into my teaching, and she usually solicited my advice on issues from academic politics to career options. We published a paper together based on work she did while at PRI. I have therefore long valued her as a scientific colleague.

During her time as my assistant, Phoebe almost literally did everything — from building exhibits to fixing computers to editing publications to assisting me with my personal research. She did everything I needed, usually better than I could have imagined, and then looked for additional challenges which she has also accomplished with great skill. As a scientist, Phoebe has made a real name for herself at a very young age, and established herself as an emerging “star” in the high-profile topic of Precambrian paleontology. She has contributed significant new observations and interpretations, and — just as importantly — presents them clearly in the context of the broader issues that Proterozoically-challenged colleagues like me are interested in. In her last year in grad school I invited her to come back to Cornell to give a departmental seminar — her first such talk — and she handled it like the seasoned professional she had already become.

In addition to all of this, Phoebe’s interests are much broader than just paleontology, which is the real justification for her receiving this award. She is passionate about teaching, about public understanding of science, about social and political issues, and in that hackneyed but in this case fully appropriate phrase, about “wanting to make a difference”. Her move to Williams College this fall — which was so richly deserved and delightful to all of us who know her — gives her another prominent and, I hope, long-term platform to continue to do just that.

I cannot take a bit of credit for Phoebe and her accomplishments, but it has been a great pleasure to watch her do so many things so well. I hope to continue to be able to do so for many years into the future. Congratulations, Phoebe, on this enormously well-justified recognition.

Response by Phoebe A. Cohen

Than you Warren, for your kind words. I am honored to be presented with this award by

the society and appreciate GSA’s dedication to supporting young women scientists.

I am here today because of the steadfast support of a huge number of mentors. As an undergraduate, these most importantly included Warren, who first sparked my love of paleontology, as well as Alex Moore, who exposed me to the interconnected systems of the Earth sciences and gave me an amazing model of what it meant to be an educator. In graduate school, I had the wonderful mentorship of Andy Knoll, who drove me to think deeply about the co-evolution of earth and life and allowed me to truly make my research my own. During my time in graduate school, I was able to tackle big issues in Neoproterozoic paleontology and mold my own vision of my research - one that combines field work, analytical tools, microscopy, and a deep appreciation for the insights of modern biology. Andy also provided me with the camaraderie of our lab, “Team Knoll”, from whom I learned more than I ever could in any lecture hall. This team included my peer mentor, dear friend, and collaborator Robin Kodner who continues to motivate and inspire me. Harvard also provided me with the guidance, support, and friendship of Charles Marshall, Francis Macdonald, Dave Jones, and Dave Johnston, many of whom I am now fortunate to include as colleagues. I was also blessed with a wide support network of paleontologists and geoscientists beyond my graduate institution including Bob Gaines, Seth Finnegan, and Shanan Peters, who broadened my horizons as a scientist and continue to help me move forward in my profession. I would also like to thank my post doc advisor Roger Summons for giving me the freedom to find my own path as a scientist, and for nominating me for this award.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge my incredibly supportive and caring parents Carl and Suzanne, and my boyfriend Zeke. My parent’s unending support of everything I’ve done truly buoyed me up during the tougher times of graduate school, while Zeke has remained my steadfast companion as I have followed my passions, even when they take me to places only reachable by helicopters and satellite phones. Thanks for always picking me up at the airport, no matter how long it had been since I’d showered.

**This award sponsored by
Subaru of America, Inc.**

