



Ellen Currano (left), Lexi Jamieson Marsh (centre) and photographer Kelsey Vance at a photoshoot.

## Q&A Lexi Jamieson Marsh and Ellen Currano

# Face to face

*Outside the hall containing the posters and exhibits at last month's Geological Society of America meeting in Denver, Colorado, was a surprise. A travelling photography exhibition displayed large, black-and-white portraits of women — wearing beards. To challenge perceptions of who is and is not a scientist, the Bearded Lady Project ([www.thebeardedladyproject.com](http://www.thebeardedladyproject.com)) has photographed more than 75 female Earth scientists; a documentary will be released in early 2017. Filmmaker and project mastermind Lexi Jamieson Marsh and palaeobotanist Ellen Currano of the University of Wyoming in Laramie, who inspired the project, talk about 'invisible women', communities of inclusivity and rocking a moustache.*

### What prompted this project?

**LJM:** Ellen and I have been friends for about eight years. We met in the small college town of Oxford, Ohio, where she told me she was a palaeontologist. I was really excited: I had never met one in real life. We were having dinner and Ellen said, "I know how you see me, but I don't necessarily see myself in that light. As a female I'm either very uncomfortable with all eyes being on me for fixing the diversity problems, or I'm ignored, talked over and not paid attention to. There are days I wish I could walk into a room with a beard on my face and just do my work."

**EC:** It was nothing I had spent a lot of time thinking about. Except that if I were male, my professional life would be easier, because

people would listen to me. There's this celebration of the large grizzled or bearded man going out in the field and facing the elements and being tough and strong, having a large pickaxe and moving giant boulders. And I can't do that. We're not in the documentaries. We're not in *National Geographic*.

**LJM:** That night, I e-mailed Ellen at 2 in the morning and asked her, what if you did wear a beard? What if we filmed you, and brought in a photographer? And we could nod to the history, that there are no pioneering women palaeontologists in the classic textbooks. We could make up

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for a lost legacy and do a tongue-in-cheek response: where are the women if this is the only image we see?

### How are you playing on the history of the bearded lady?

**LJM:** We're walking a fine line, playing with gender identity. I don't expect everyone to understand it. It can be kind of uncomfortable to see a woman with facial hair. But it does nod to the discomfort that comes with women in power positions in science — that they still aren't supposed to be there. The bearded lady is in this ambiguous state of masculine and feminine, which ties nicely in with the many cases of how women in science feel — that they're there, but not really there. With the film, I wanted to challenge what is shown in mass media. It shows women being independent, being physical and scientifically minded.

### How did the women choose their facial hair?

**LJM:** I did most of the facial hair. I have a background in theatre. The scientists choose where they're filmed, what they're photographed wearing, what tools they would like in the picture. The only thing we alter is the beard. We're not dressing them up like men, it's very much who they are and what they do. But if all that changes with the beard, and your mind can't figure out who this person is, that's the goal. Carole Hickman at the University of California, Berkeley, said she would like to participate, but would bring her own moustache. In the 1970s, she worked in the Australian outback and, as a young woman working alone, she was constantly approached by men. She got a moustache, threw it on and got her work done. So that is her moustache.

### How do you think you look in the photo?

**EC:** I think my parents said it best — I look like I should be on a wanted poster. I look tired and run-down, like I've been out in the field for a long time and I'm dirty. And I was. The beard I could do without, but I think I really rock that moustache.

### What do you hope people will get out of this project?

**EC:** The community of inclusion. Making ties between scientists. And the knowledge that you can look however you want and do good science, and people shouldn't be judging you. This project is just one part of getting there.

**LJM:** I hope it brings awareness that might not be realized in the moment of coming to see the portraits. We want to have something people can think about, and then come to a realization that there is something wrong. The belief system can be questioned. ■

**INTERVIEW BY ALEXANDRA WITZ**

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.