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Worcester naturalist, 16, shares lore on snakes

By Amanda Roberge CORRESPONDENT



Emily Erickson has started her own business, Emily's Backyard Creatures, at home in Worcester. She holds Rose, her 2-year-old pastel ball python. (T&G STAFF/RICK CINCLAIR)

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WORCESTER — From the outside, Emily Erickson's house looks like a quaint suburban homestead, nestled in the cul-de-sac of an expansive neighborhood bursting with little kids on bikes and scooters, moms pushing strollers and high school kids mowing lawns.

But make no mistake: It's a jungle in there.

For the last several years, though Emily is only 16 this month, she has been honing her craft as a naturalist and educator, having recently created a webpage for her endeavor, Emily's Backyard Creatures. And her focus is on the creature that terrifies humans across the globe — snakes.

Working to dispel the many myths about snakes and to promote an accurate understanding of how they operate, Emily has begun fulfilling her mission, starting in the neighborhood where she lives.

"The kids in my neighborhood starting stopping by and ringing my doorbell asking if I could do a snake show," said the Doherty Memorial High School junior. After a couple of years of her backyard show, in which she showcases her five snakes — Draco the black garter snake, Speckles the albino garter snake, the twin brown checkered garter snakes Tic and Tac, and a pastel ball python named Rose — she has started to seek local gigs where she can share her extensive knowledge.

"I have always loved animals and wanted to help educate people," she said. "But what I really want to do is share my passion."

This sentiment is not unlike her inspiration and unknowing mentor, Steve Irwin, a conservationist and educator widely known as "The Crocodile Hunter." On the day that he died in 2006 after being pierced in the chest by a stingray barb during the filming of a documentary, Emily's mom, Jo, had to bring her home from school. Emily says that she had idolized Irwin for most of her life.

"She cried all day," said Mrs. Erickson, who now hopes to help her daughter carry on his legend. "I have always encouraged my kids to do what they love, and from the time Emily was small, she has loved being with animals."

Part of what makes Emily and her backyard creatures so impressive is not only Emily's knowledge about the snakes but also her ability to connect with her audience. Just having the snakes around leads to questions about their habits, dangers, diets and more.

And Emily has the answers on hand — try to stump her and you might walk away disappointed. Words like "neurotoxic saliva" roll off her tongue as they were the first ones she ever spoke.

"I study this stuff," she said, motioning to a bookcase full of texts on herpetology and reptiles, with Rose the python curled comfortably around her neck. Are her friends afraid to sleepover in a house full of snakes? That's a yes. "They think I'm insane."

As Emily pursues engagements at local libraries and schools, she is content to be doing the very thing she loves. Caring for her snakes is a full-time job, and one with great benefits.

"She has a world of knowledge about reptiles in her head," said Mrs. Erickson.

For more information or to contact Emily for a school/library engagement, visit www.emilysbackyardcreatures.com.

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