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The Ways We Give to GSA: Ellen Wohl's Geology Journeys and Legacies

Ellen Wohl has always been an explorer. She grew up immersed in nature, encouraged by her high school science teacher father and school librarian mother to investigate and analyze the ecosystems that surrounded her.

From a young age, she knew she wanted to keep learning about natural science. After earning degrees in geology from Arizona State and the University of Arizona, she joined the faculty at Colorado State University. This has been her academic home over a long and distinguished career as an expert in fluvial morphology.

The Geological Society of America (GSA) has been part of Ellen's journey since her student days. While completing her education, Ellen won a Fulbright-Hayes Grant to conduct research in Northern Australia. While prestigious, this award did not cover all costs. Ellen was awarded a GSA Research Grant for the same period, which provided affirmation along with vital funding. She notes, "psychologically and financially, that support is really critical."

The impact of this early award has stayed with Ellen—and inspired her to endow funds for future generations of geoscience students. She instigated and funded, in whole or part, GSA's Marie Morisawa Award, Troy L. Péwé Award, Victor R. Baker Graduate Student Research Grant Award, and Stanley A. Schumm Research Grant Fund. These GSA funds have supported numerous students and their research over the past years, and they will continue to do so in perpetuity.

Ellen's approach exemplifies the long-term impact of endowed giving. $100,000 invested in an endowment today, presuming historical return rates and an annual payout rate of 4.5%, will, over 50 years—the blink of an eye in geologic time—provide more than $350,000 in program support while growing



Ellen Wohl.

to $438,000 in principal. Endowed funds are truly the gift that keeps on giving to more students, scholars, and investigators—and spur new discoveries that drive the future of geoscience.

Upon receiving a recent bequest from her mother, Ellen decided to give back yet again. She established the Richard and Annette Wohl Fund to provide research support to a graduate student whose proposal demonstrates an environmental sustainability connection to their proposed investigation.

Unlike the other funds, it is not named for a geoscientist. It is named for Ellen's parents: the intrepid explorers who nurtured her curiosity and encouraged her appreciation of ecology. "They raised me to ask questions, investigate the outdoors, and do all the things natural scientists do," Ellen says. GSA and the GSA Foundation are honored that Ellen chose to memorialize her parents in this way.

Ellen's parents also inspired her to build bridges between scientists and the curious general public. Thanks in part to their mentorship, she became skilled at sharing her expertise with lay audiences. This led to a flourishing career as an author on top of her work as a scholar and researcher.

Ellen's most recent book, Following the Bend: How to Read a River and Understand Its Nature, was published by Princeton University Press in September 2025. Following the Bend explains river ecosystems for lay readers. Where is the river flowing to or from, and why? Why is its water clear or turbid? Which fish and aquatic life make rivers their habitats, and what do they need to thrive? This book is attracting substantial attention and accolades. Ellen was recently invited to discuss it on the "Talk Nerdy" and "Listening to America" podcasts.

Ellen's journey shows how geoscience impacts all our lives. You too can further the excellence and impact of GSA for generations to come. Please scan the QR code below to donate now, or contact GSA Foundation Executive Director Sean O'Brien, PhD, at sobrien@geosociety.org. The GSA Foundation would love to help you learn how you, like Ellen, can create a legacy for the future of geoscience.

You can also contact Sean or Becky Priest Santavicca at bsantavicca@geosociety.org if you would like to learn more about the GSA Foundation's upcoming rendezvous trips to Death Valley (29 March–3 April 2026) or Bryce Canyon (6–11 September 2026).



Ellen's parents, Richard and Annette Wohl. Photo from Ellen Wohl.

All donations make a difference. Please scan the QR code to make a gift now, or contact GSA Foundation Executive Director Sean O'Brien, PhD, at sobrien@geosociety.org to learn about more ways to give. Gifts to the GSA Foundation are fully tax-deductible under U.S. law.

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