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Cosmetic chemist takes on the beauty aisle

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Good Housekeeping Institute's Danusia Wnek on how being creative and resourceful helps her test product claims

By: Louisa Dalton, special to C&EN

Danusia Wnek with an array of moisturizing shampoos and conditioners to evaluate Credit: Mike Garten

When Danusia Wnek was young, she loved bath time, especially watching bubbles form when soap met running water. As she got older, she played with beauty products and created her own masks to fight acne. "I knew I wanted to be in cosmetics practically since I was born," she says.

Wnek grew up in Brooklyn, New York, the child of Polish immigrants. School didn’t come easily to her as a kid, but something clicked for Wnek while studying chemistry at St. John’s University.

She interned at Good Housekeeping Institute in the Health, Beauty & Environmental Sciences Lab for a summer, then graduated college with a BS in 2011. Wnek then landed at Estée Lauder, a “dream job” where she helped formulate foundations and concealers for 2½ years.

In 2014, Wnek returned to the Good Housekeeping Institute, where she tests product claims for the magazine and for the Good Housekeeping Seal. Her job varies widely and includes crunching data from home product testers, writing lab reports, helping editors fact-check her data in the magazine, and reviewing ingredients in beauty products.

Wnek is currently studying part-time toward an MS in pharmaceutical sciences at the University of Cincinnati.

Of all the parts of your job, what’s your favorite?
Data crunching, to come up with the winners of the “best of the test” for the magazine.

What’s a part of your job you didn’t expect?
The amount of creativity that goes into evaluating products. Coming up with a protocol that will accurately describe the efficacy of a product is the hardest thing about the job.

What’s your favorite molecule?
Menthol. It has so many uses in the cosmetic industry: muscle pain relief, after-sunburn relief, cough suppressants. I find it fascinating—the smell and the cooling sensations it creates.

What do you like to do outside of work?
I love hiking and being in nature. I want to visit 50 states before age 40, and this summer I’m hiking at Yellowstone and Glacier National Park (states 19 and 20).

What experiment are you currently working on?
I’m evaluating styling sprays that claim to volumize and thicken hair.

What is your favorite lab tool?
The Visia complexion analyzer, which is a photo booth you put your face into. It takes pictures of the skin and assesses wrinkle count, pore count, UV spots, and red spots.

Do you read ingredient lists in beauty products?
When I take baths, I read the ingredient labels on products near my bathtub. I reverse engineer them to try and formulate that product based on the ingredients.

Do you ever find the beauty aisle in the grocery store intimidating?
No, that’s my habitat! Every time I go to a grocery store or drugstore, I always stop by the beauty aisle to see what’s going on.

What’s your personal beauty routine?
Cleanse and moisturize. I also use sunscreen. I’ve taken countless images using the Visia complexion analyzer showing photodamage on my skin. Sunscreen is the best preventative antiaging product on the market.

Louisa Dalton is a freelance contributor to Chemical & Engineering News, the newsmagazine of the American Chemical Society. This interview was edited for length and clarity.
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