





GEEKING OUT

on happiness

Mayim Bialik's perfectly
imperfect life.

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“There’s an unintended bit of art imitating life,” says *The Big Bang Theory* actress Mayim Bialik of her role on the CBS sitcom as socially anxious braniac Dr. Amy Farrah Fowler, one of the most lovable and quirky, strong and intelligent female characters on television.

“I based Amy on a combination of a few professors I know, but there are unintentional little bits of me in her, too. I’m pretty socially awkward and was a late bloomer,” Mayim says. “Even though I was pretty outgoing, I wasn’t a showbiz ham-it-up kid. I was raised in a very expressive and loud Eastern European household where I was taught to speak up for myself and debate at the kitchen table. But, like Amy, I don’t feel confident socially. I’d rather stay in my PJs and watch award shows from my sofa at home than be on the red carpet.”

The 40-year-old’s portrayal of the blunt-tongued, romantically-challenged Ph.D. has earned Mayim the admiration of millions of fans of the show and several award nominations and wins, including the 2016 Critics’ Choice award for best supporting actress in a comedy series.

Both Mayim and her alter ego hold neuroscience-related Ph.D.s. Mayim’s is in neuroscience; Amy Farrah Fowler’s is in neurobiology. “I studied how brains work and she slices them apart,” she jokes.

“There’s perhaps a bit more crossover of my education and that of my character’s than there is for a lot of actors. But it’s a total coincidence that my two worlds collided,” she explains. “Actors are required to play all sorts of roles they have no experience with. The writers and cast of our show do an incredibly amazing job at scripting and portraying people in fields they don’t have formal training in.”

Her affection for science was seeded on the set of *Blossom* and nurtured in her undergraduate years in college. Yet that real-life advanced degree might not hang on Mayim’s

wall if not for crossing paths with one college-age tutor when she was a teenager.

As the star of the popular NBC sitcom *Blossom*, which aired for five seasons from 1990 to 1995, Mayim was tutored in her dressing room instead of attending a traditional school with spelling tests and recess. And schoolwork wasn’t necessarily her favorite part of the day.

“I didn’t learn the way other kids did; science definitely didn’t come naturally to me,” she says. “But I had an amazing tutor, an undergraduate dental student at UCLA who’s now a dental surgeon. She was my first female role model geared toward science and made the topic accessible to me through things like colorful, hands-on projects and vivid but relatable examples instead of mundane lectures. She taught with

an excitement in her voice that sparked my love of biology. She showed me that I had the ability to pursue science or anything I was interested in.”

Mayim is proud of the examples set by the cast and crew on *The Big Bang Theory*. “It’s gratifying when people point out that we’re role models to young girls wanting to pursue scientific careers,” she says. “That’s the best way I can envision to give back to the woman who taught me that my scientific sky had no limit.”

But how did she end up back on television? The chance to portray the love interest of Dr. Sheldon Cooper (played by Jim Parsons) is a coincidence Mayim calls a “fortunate, beautiful accident” that occurred out of necessity.

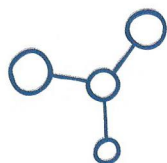
“I wasn’t planning a life as a full-time actor. I wanted to be a lifelong learner and continue to study all I could

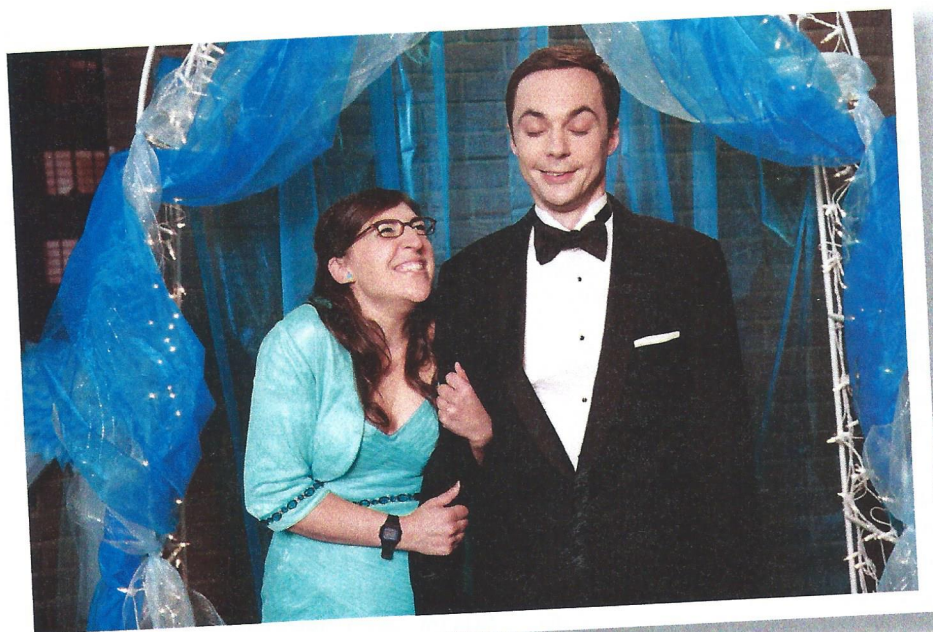
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Characters Amy and Sheldon, played by Mayim Bialik and Jim Parsons, re-create a high school prom during an episode of *The Big Bang Theory*.

about neuroscience. So I settled into a groove of tutoring and teaching piano while raising my sons, but I was running out of health insurance and needed to find a job. I'm so blessed the job I landed in 2009 was actually the chance to both honor the woman who tutored me so many years ago and simultaneously work with such a phenomenal group of people."

Mayim has enjoyed and appreciated her professional successes. But she hasn't let them go to her head. Instead of basking in the glittering lights of fame, Mayim says her secret for achieving personal and familial bliss and balance is simple: live a normal life.

Imperfectly Ordinary

Born in San Diego, she was bitten by the acting bug before she hit double digits. At 8 years old, Mayim had roles in the 1988 supernatural thriller *Pumpkinhead* and guest-starred on several sitcoms including *The Facts of Life*. And when most teens find themselves earning money for movies and clothes by baby-sitting, at 13 Mayim earned her Screen Actors Guild card after working on the fantasy

drama *Beauty and the Beast*. She went on to appear in Michael Jackson's music video for "Liberian Girl" and at 14 landed the title role in *Blossom*.

When the show ended, Mayim traded weekly scripts and early call times to be on set for textbooks and early lectures on the campus of UCLA. She was also accepted to Harvard and Yale but opted for an education closer to home. "Sitcom acting is not a surefire path to success by any means," Mayim says. "An education is something you can rely on for a lifetime."

She credits family role models for the work ethic that led to earning undergraduate degrees in neuroscience, Hebrew and Jewish studies in 2000. "I was raised in a very eclectic, Bohemian environment, but it was one that also featured a very strong educational ethic and the importance of earning a college degree," Mayim explains. "My grandparents were immigrants and they impressed the importance of working hard and striving to find and reach my potential."

As a college student, Mayim quickly shed her Hollywood skin, immersing herself in campus life. A dedicated student leader, she founded and led a Women's Rosh Chodesh (the Jewish holiday that marks the entry of a new Jewish month) group, chanting and blowing shofar for high holiday services,

and conducting and writing music for UCLA's Jewish cappella group.

Even after a grueling battle with an organic chemistry course, Mayim says college fed her voracious appetite for learning. "I was in awe of the neuron and absolutely fell in love with it. I loved how it was the smallest, most intimate level at which we could understand each experience and interaction we had as humans."

Completely enmeshed in what she calls an "ordinary life"—she gave birth to her first son, Miles, (with then husband, Michael), in 2005 while working on her Ph.D.

"Neuroscience is an amazing field of study because it includes child development. I chose it because it's the science of how we think and process emotions. And as a mom and person of deep religious faith, I find that so interesting because those aspects of my life are so emotional and significant. It's fascinating to look at how emotions are born in the brain and that perspective made it the perfect field of study for me." She completed UCLA's program in neuroscience in 2007 with a doctorate that examined obsessive-compulsive disorder in adolescents with Prader-Willi syndrome, the genetic disorder that causes obesity and intellectual disability.

After finishing school, her days were filled with making organic shampoo and baby food for Miles and then his brother, Frederick, born in 2008. "I'm a very crunchy granola kind of mom," she says.

During this time her passion for exploring her Jewish faith swelled. She continued to (and still does) analyze Jewish text, regularly attend synagogue with her kids and celebrate Jewish

holidays in traditional ways. Tapping into her creative side, Mayim started blogging on Kveller.com about life as a Jewish woman in the new millennium and enjoys spiritual and creative exercises that strengthen her faith while giving her the freedom to question it.

Mayim instructed home-schooled children in her community and taught her sons to play the piano. She experimented with perfecting vegan recipes for her family. "My life was very suburban and domestic," she says.

Mayim credits her self-proclaimed "ordinary life" with helping her maintain her sense of grounding and balance. "I don't have a housekeeper or a nanny to take my kids while I attend a Pilates class. I'd never pass judgment on those who do because that's none of my business. Those things just aren't right for me," Mayim says. "I honestly like to cook our meals and clean up after them. There's something relaxing about taking a break from the hustle and bustle to fold laundry or vacuum." She even looks to those chores as opportunities to strengthen familial and religious bonds. "In preparation for Passover, I'll enlist my kids' help to give my kitchen appliances a good cleaning."

But don't mistake ordinary for mundane or dull.

"My life is perfectly imperfect. It's messy and sometimes chaotic," she adds. "I lose my keys when I'm already running late, my dryer eats one sock and I find myself needing to be two places at once. But those, and similar, everyday occurrences are part of a 'real' life. They're what thousands of moms

and dads experience every day and I think that commonality with peers is comforting to all parents."

However, Mayim admits she didn't always embrace imperfection. "It's something you have to come to terms with," she says. "But accepting that you're running late, forgot to wrap a birthday present or whatever imperfection that crosses your path means you're living in the present. And that awareness allows you to soak up and enjoy all of life's gifts granted every day."

'Hands On' Parenting

Mayim's strong connection to community and tradition contribute to her daily happiness.

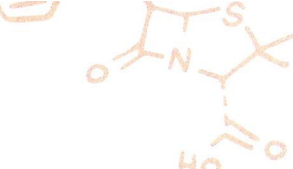
"I really love autumn and all the reasons to celebrate as a family. My

sons' birthdays are in early fall and we have the Jewish New Year in September." Celebrating harvests and holidays within their four walls, as well as among family, neighbors and friends, have created some of her family's favorite memories. "We love the rise of jack-o'-lanterns in LA, corn mazes and roasting pumpkin seeds. And my sons trick-or-treat annually with their father. Traditions and simple rituals contribute to helping maintain educational and emotional harmony for me and my children. It's uplifting to rely on and take part in seasonal and religious celebrations."

Mayim calls herself and ex-husband, Michael, "hands on" parents. "Being divorced is never pleasant but we parent pleasantly together," she says. "We home-school our boys, which gives


LEFT: Sheldon and Amy in the "The Clean Room Infiltration" episode of *The Big Bang Theory*. **RIGHT:** Cast and crew of *The Big Bang Theory* enjoy their photo op at the 2016 People's Choice Awards earlier this year.





EMOTIONS

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them a lot of freedom and flexibility to determine where their interests lie, and how to best pursue them."

They incorporate exciting and appropriate technology, field trips and imaginative school supplies such as creative homemade doughs, goo and more in their sons' school days.

"My kids are a big source of happiness and joy for me," she says. "I love spending time with them and I try to stay in the moment and enjoy us sharing 'little things' like making a salad together instead of worrying about the dishes I'll have to clean up after the meal."

Time spent with her boys re-energizes Mayim. "It's very refreshing for me. I cook or do laundry while they play nearby. I actually like ironing and folding my napkins. I was raised to find joy in simple tasks, domestic or otherwise, and I'm trying to model that for my sons, too."

But she realizes what makes her happy might not have the same effect for her children. "You're the best determiner of what makes you happy." So one of her top priorities is fostering self-acceptance in her children to help them reach for whichever star they set their sights on.

"My younger son is very dreamy and artistic and I don't want him to think that's not the way he should be. They both were late developers in terms of speaking and walking. We believe how they came out is how they were supposed to and want them to embrace every unique trait or characteristic and

proudly carry them throughout life. If they want to be surgeons, artists, teachers or accountants I want them to know nothing is off limits or outside their reach."

The Perfect Job

Working on a sitcom fills Mayim's workdays with laughter and camaraderie. But her philanthropic efforts in her day-to-day life have a much more serious tone and connection to her academic pursuits.

Several years ago Mayim partnered with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), a nationwide organization that advocates for legislation to protect and support people with mental illness. "People in my life suffer from mental illness and I have benefited from the resources, services and support of this incredible nonprofit organization, as have thousands of people."

NAMI provides free lectures and counseling across the country for individuals with a mental illness and the people who love them. "Mayim is a generous and unique supporter of NAMI because she's not only a celebrity helping increase awareness, she's a recipient of programs and services," says Katrina Gay, NAMI's national director of communications and public affairs. "When someone recognizable like Mayim speaks out by sharing their experience, it helps erase stigmas and gives people the permission they often want to follow her example."

"Curing mental illness and eliminating the need for our fellow man to dull pain with alcohol, drugs and other addictions is a daunting task.

It takes a combination of state, national and global awareness of mental illness to erase the stigma against even talking about it, let alone seeking treatment," Mayim says. "I've seen how individuals who struggle with mental illness or addiction are surrounded by family and friends who also need support but rarely get any. It's time for all of us to step up and change the conversation."

Along with participating in local walks and speaking on behalf of NAMI, Mayim filmed a public service announcement "Stigma Free" in May 2016 to change the conversation about mental illness. "Words and character assessments, even if said jokingly, like 'weirdo,' 'OCD' and 'nuts' can be hurtful and discourage those living with mental illness to seek out help and support," Mayim says.

While she loves wearing multiple hats with titles of "mom," "neuroscientist," "mental health advocate" and "Sheldon's girlfriend," there is one hat she's unlikely to put back on. Despite fans still asking for a *Blossom* reunion, Mayim says she doesn't see one in her future. "Way back when a show was written about a girl growing up...and she grew up," Mayim says. "But I never say 'never' so maybe one will happen someday, as long as I don't have to dance or wear flowery hats!" 