



## A Conversation with Emma Sagarese

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Dear Fellow Chemists:

I have been honored by the AIC to write an introduction to this interview I conducted with a chemistry teacher, Emma Sagarese, who teaches the subject at a school for young people having learning difficulties.

As the former Editor-in-Chief of EuroCosmetics, author of numerous books and Chief Scientific Advisor to HBA Global Expo, I am a long-time lover of how chemistry is so valuable to us in the cosmetic and personal care industry.

Introspection- in- depth has led to the evolution of nature's biochemicals and our groups contributions to making "synthetic" chemicals. These have gone to the heart of humanities wishes to look good, feel good and be young in the face of inevitably growing older.

Herein, I share with you the joy of educating and guiding younger people to careers in chemistry. It all began when my grandson told his chemistry teacher, Mrs. Sagarese, that his Grandpa was a chemist. She called me to see if I would be interested in Zoom classes to show her early high school classes a novel approach beyond the Table of the Elements, etc.

I chose the novel approach of having them bring in cosmetic and personal care products and engaged them in looking closely at the "chemicals" in the products they and their families used.

I then conducted an interview with Mrs. Sagarese about the classes we taught and sought an appropriate publication that would benefit our industry and our contribution to it. The AIC has graciously agreed to publish this article/interview, It is the result of that Adventure- one of mentoring young teenagers in their search for what they were going to do when they "grew up."

Finally, as the poet that I am, as well as being a chemist, I also share with you a poem I wrote that goes to the heart of the matter. My wish and invitation to you is that you read it and gain value reflecting upon its deeper conglomerate message.

Meyer R. Rosen FAIC,FRSC, CPC,CChE

## 1. A Conversation with Emma Sagarese

*The personal care and cosmetic industry is an ideal area to attract new contributors who will create previously unthought-of pathways that expand our experience of well-being by making us look good and feel good. This article provides some insight in how to empower the young among us towards achieving that goal.*

**MR:** Hello Emma! I see you are a chemistry high school teacher. How do you look at chemistry?

**ES:** The way I look at it is grounded in a quote by Walter White:

"Well, technically chemistry is the study of matter. But I prefer to see it as the study of change."

**MR:** So how did you get started in your career?

**EC:** Ask anyone about their high school chemistry class and you will get a variety of answers. Some people might say they loved it ("We got to blow things up!") while other might say they hated it ("Oxidation numbers? Stoichiometry? No thanks!"). For me personally, I never felt very strongly about the class one way or the other. However, if you told me when I was a junior in high school that one day I would be up in front of the class TEACHING chemistry, the obnoxious teenage version of myself would have rolled her eyes, continued passing a note to her friend in class, and told you I was going to have a career WAY cooler than being a science teacher. Well, flash forward twenty years and here I am in my fourteenth year of teaching science at Newmark High School in Scotch Plains, New Jersey. Our school is an out of district placement that serves students living with autism spectrum disorders, mood disorders, anxiety disorders, attention issues and other developmental disabilities.

**MR:** That certainly seems challenging. Please elaborate:

**ES:** When it comes to my career, I like to think that I did not choose to work in special education as much as it chose me. When I was in high school, I thought I was going to be a physical therapist. I chose to attend a college with a highly ranked physical therapy program and majored in biology. When I was finishing up my bachelors and it actually came time to apply for the Master's program to continue my education and earn my degree in Physical Therapy, I was no longer sure that it was what I wanted to do. I graduated from Stockton College (now University) with a bachelor's degree in Biology and absolutely no idea what to do with it. What followed was a two-year span of odd jobs and a lot of soul searching.

In 2008, I saw an advertisement in the Sunday edition of the Star-Ledger (it's not an urban legend kids...people ACTUALLY can get hired this way.) It was a position as a Classroom Assistant at Newmark High School. I still remember my initial interview like it was yesterday...walking into a hot school building in July (our building didn't have central air until 2013), sitting in a small office, and sweating in a black pinstriped business suit that I have not worn since.

As I sat across from the principal responding to her questions and engaging in conversation, I like to think I appeared confident and slayed that interview (spoiler alert...I got the job). However, I also had no true teaching experience at the high school level or in special education, so I did question my own ability to be successful in my new role. I spent one year as a classroom assistant and during that time I passed my Praxis test and applied for my teaching certification. By the next year, I was offered a position as the Newmark High School science teacher and never looked back.

**MR:** What happened after that?

**ES:** Earlier this school year, we were in class one day preparing a lab on halogens and a student mentioned that his grandfather was a chemist. He further explained that he had been in the industry for many years and even invented a polymer. In my mind, I thought “Well, that’s impressive and interesting” but did not even consider the possibility that something transformative could result from the information I had just been given. Luckily, one of the directors of Newmark Education happened to be in the room as the conversation was happening. She and I had a discussion after class and her immediate response was “How do we get him here?” She had instantly recognized an opportunity that I would have allowed to easily slip away.

**MR:** Personally, I am so glad your Director asked that question and you followed up on it. What happened then?

**ES:** After class, my director and I discussed how to proceed with contacting this student’s grandfather to see if he would be interested in sharing his knowledge with our Chemistry classes. The student informed me that his grandfather lived in Florida. Since I knew there was little possibility that he could join us in person, I suggested that maybe he would like to connect with the classes via Zoom. Hopeful, but not having super high expectations I gave my contact email to the student to pass along to his grandfather.

Low and behold, I received an email soon after from Meyer Rosen who said he loved chemistry and was the Editor-in-Chief of EURO COSMETIC Magazine. He expressed that he thought connecting with the class via a Zoom call was a great idea and he was happy to participate. We set up a phone conference which allowed us to get to know each other, discuss what topics we were currently covering in Chemistry, and how sharing his knowledge and work experience could make the content we were studying more relatable and relevant to the students.

From our first telephone conversation, I was immediately impressed by Meyer’s desire to set goals and accomplish them. Here was a man with a striking resume who had already achieved so much, yet continues to reach for more and seize opportunity as opposed to becoming complacent. It was evident that he genuinely cared about giving today’s youth a quality science education and was willing to help me do so by bringing his expertise and experience into my classroom.

**MR:** I am blushing...what happened after that?

**ES:** Over the next few weeks, Meyer and I ironed out the details and set up a Zoom call with the chemistry classes. **We decided to have the lesson focus on personal care products/cosmetic science.** Each student was asked to bring in a personal care product that we could discuss. Our lesson's focus was on the chemical properties of the care products, exploring the ingredients of each product, breaking down the ingredients to the molecular and atomic level, and discussing the various career opportunities available within the chemical industry. Meyer also explained the safety laws and protocols that must be followed when creating and manufacturing personal care products. It was exciting to see my students engage in the lesson, ask deep questions, and think about the real-world applications of chemistry.

When the lesson was over, I asked the students how they felt about it and the feedback was very positive. Several students stated that they found the information presented to be interesting and relevant. A student from one class said that they “enjoyed bringing in their own (product) to relate to the topic.” They also had flattering things to say about Meyer himself and felt that it was exciting to talk to an expert in the chemical industry. One student wrote, “I enjoyed Mr. Rosen’s personality. He was an endearing speaker, he had this flair of elderly charm and wisdom which one cannot ignore.”

**MR:** Sounds like the idea of teaching “hard” chemistry by starting with personal care products was a good one. What do you think about it?

**ES:** I am at a point in my career where I am confident in my teaching ability. I have a wonderful co-teacher and we have created a safe, nurturing, and fun environment for our students. I am no longer just trying to stay afloat and survive. I am SWIMMING in the metaphorical ocean that is the field of education and enjoying the turn of the tide. Working with Meyer was a pleasant and successful experience. I am inspired to seek new ways to make chemistry a positive experience for my students and help them reach their full potential.

**MR:** Seems this way of approaching high school students is worth much for interesting them in career paths they never thought of before. These days, starting with the next generation of students, as you did, is a great idea. We all need to seek mentors like you and I acknowledge your openness to transforming the quality of chemical education- as well as choosing to do it through the doorway of personal care and cosmetic products.

**MR:** Thank you so much for our conversation!

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### **Bio of Emma Sagarese**

Emma Sagarese is a high school science teacher in Scotch Plains, NJ. She resides in Belleville, NJ with her husband, three children (Scarlett, Joseph, and Mark), and their dog, Duncan. Emma has recently completed her Master’s Degree in Special Education through Seton Hall University. In her free time, she enjoys running, traveling, and the month of August.

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## **When Youth is Upon Us, Again**

In the Beginning  
There was  
The Glow of Youth-  
The Promise of Things to Come

And Then  
There was Aging-  
The Soft Smoothness  
Crinkling to Wrinkling  
And the Bloom of the Rose  
Turning, Turning  
To Life's  
Invisible Churning

And Now...  
We Stand Tall  
Saying, NO!  
Not yet

Fall back ye  
Demons of the Night!

Banding Together  
We Seek  
The Scientific  
Biochemical Mysteries

Skin Deep and Within

We are One in the Fight  
Searching to the Farthest  
Corners of the Globe

From the Rain Forests  
To the Deserts-  
To the Oceans and their  
Volcanic Fissures

Searching Out the Secrets  
Of the Glow's Return-  
Soothing the  
Wrinkled Brow

Be Gone ye  
Feet of Crow!  
Give Way to the  
Chirping of Spring-  
When Youth is  
Upon Us Again

When Youth is Upon Us, Again

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