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TOP STORY

Country Roads to the cosmos: Emily Calandrelli is the 2024 West Virginian of the Year

By Sierra Marling smarling@hdmediallc.com
Dec 19, 2024



[Emily Calandrelli](#) made headlines in November as the 100th woman to journey into space. But for West Virginians, her ascent aboard Blue Origin's rocket was also a moment of state pride as we watched one of our own propel their dreams to the cosmos.

After all, she was only the second woman from the Mountain State to reach those heights.

In addition to achieving her astronaut aspirations, Calandrelli has a professional list of accomplishments anyone would be proud of:

- Award-winning children's book author
- The first woman in the U.S. with her own nationwide science show
- MIT-educated scientist

Through her activism, she also helped write a bill to improve the federal Transportation Security Administration's policy on



Emily Calandrelli poses with a West Virginia state flag after her trip to space on Nov. 22, 2024.

Courtesy Photo

breastfeeding mothers, and started a campaign that improved parental leave in the aerospace industry.

Before her Blue Origin flight, Calandrelli stayed grounded despite her achievements, using her platform to promote and improve life in the Mountain State.

For her perseverance and inspirational rise as a woman in STEM, and for her leadership in paving paths to success for Mountain State residents and women around the country, Calandrelli has been named the 2024 Gazette-Mail West Virginian of the Year.



Past Gazette-Mail West Virginian of the Year honorees

 4 min to read

Photos: 2024 West Virginian of the Year, Emily Calandrelli



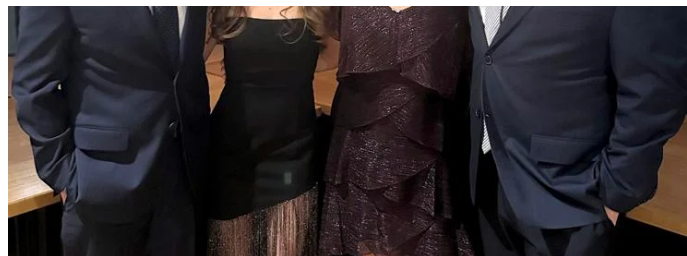
Deep mountain roots

Calandrelli said her journey to space began long before she stepped foot on campus at West Virginia University, where she earned her bachelor's degree. Her parents, Ben and Kim Calandrelli, worked hard to build their children a road to success.

As children, they told Emily and her brother, Drew, stories about how they grew up.



Ben Calandrelli was raised by a single mother in 1950s Morgantown alongside three siblings. His mother worked as a waitress and took on odd jobs to help the family.



From left: Ben Calandrelli, Emily Calandrelli, Kim Calandrelli, and Drew Calandrelli, are shown in December 2023.

Courtesy photo

Even though Ben Calandrelli and his siblings grew up lacking many comforts and essentials while living in dilapidated housing, and moving seven times in Morgantown, he said he appreciated his mother and wouldn't change a thing about his childhood.

Emily Calandrelli said the greatest gifts her parents gave her were grit, perseverance and resilience, qualities that shaped her into the person she is today.

She said her father embodied those qualities by modeling a strong work ethic and drive. She praised him for helping support his family since he was 11 and going on to become the first college graduate in his family.

There was no way to know that someday his daughter would fly to space or that — when she went — she would want to take a piece of him with her.



In a July Instagram post, Emily Calandrelli wrote, "My dad has always been my inspiration to reach higher. I wish I could go back and hug that little boy who came from nothing and tell him we reach the stars."

In a [video](#) posted before her space flight, Ben Calandrelli cried when his daughter asked to bring his college ring to space. It meant a lot to him because it, along with his first car at 18, symbolized his ongoing determination and financial freedom.

At 67, Ben Calandrelli and his wife Kim watched their own ambitions and hard work realized as their daughter flew to space carrying his college ring.

—

'I wasn't always an MIT-trained engineer'

This same humble attitude Ben Calandrelli expressed about growing up in Morgantown is reflected in Emily's longtime pattern of generosity.

Ben Calandrelli fondly recalled how she would grow out her hair to donate to Locks of Love and throw backyard carnivals for charitable causes, with her mother at the helm making it a memorable and adorable experience.



Emily Calandrelli poses for her first day of first grade in Morgantown in August 1993.

BEN CALANDRELLI | Courtesy photo

Emily Calandrelli's childhood was filled with the warmth of West Virginia traditions, from her mother's legendary pepperoni rolls to family trips following the WVU Mountaineers.

While life at home was rich in love, she encountered her own unique challenges, including some cynics who questioned her abilities. However, in her own acts of grit, perseverance and resilience, she pushed through.

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—*Emily Calandrelli*

As she set her sights on college, Emily Calandrelli's focus was on making enough money to live comfortably, which led her to pursue engineering.

Though she was one of only two women in a program of 50, she found passion in the science of it all.

"I chose to go into engineering because I wanted a good job. When I got there, I discovered how wonderful it was. I found the joy and the adventure and became obsessed with it," she said.

While at West Virginia University, Emily Calandrelli became a Truman Scholar, which led her to a summer internship in Washington, D.C., for former U.S. Rep. Alan Mollohan, D-W.Va. In 2009, she was named to the USA Today all-academic team, won the Barry M. Goldwater Scholarship and was voted Ms. Mountaineer. She also interned at NASA, where she met her future husband, Tommy Franklin.



Emily Calandrelli poses with a banner at WVU after she won the Truman Scholarship in May 2008.

Courtesy photo

She was pivotal in founding the Student Partnership for the Advancement of Cosmic Exploration at WVU. Through this organization, she and her peers engaged in public outreach and hosted events that made STEM more accessible and fun for young students.

Majid Jaridi, who served as director of the NASA West Virginia Space Grant Consortium, first met Emily Calandrelli when she applied for a NASA Space Grant scholarship.

"I am confident that she is destined to become a leader in science and exploration arenas in the U.S. space program, and a leader in society as well."

—*Majid Jaridi, who served as director of the NASA West Virginia Space Grant Consortium*

Jaridi, who has mentored students for nearly 20 years, said Emily Calandrelli outperforms most in terms of her abilities, accomplishments and character.

In a recommendation letter to MIT, he praised her leadership, compassion and commitment to helping others, writing, "I am confident that she is destined to become a leader in science and exploration arenas in the U.S. space program, and a leader in society as well."

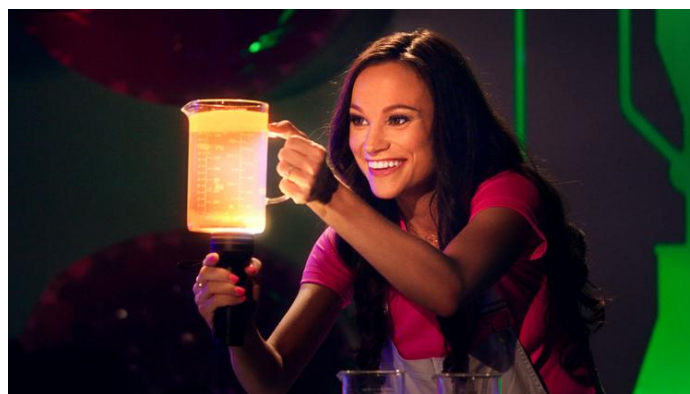
At WVU, Emily Calandrelli earned a degree in mechanical and aerospace engineering. Then she pursued two master's degrees at MIT — one in aeronautics and astronautics and another in technology and policy.

Ten years ago, she began as a TV show host on "Xploration Outer Space," which ran for six seasons. Later, she wrote for TechCrunch, which brought in a tech-savvy audience. Then she joined the Netflix show "Bill Nye Saves the World" as a correspondent,



Emily Calandrelli poses in front of a building at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston after she graduated in June 2013.

Courtesy photo



Morgantown native Emily Calandrelli takes her love of science


reaching more adults in science and tech. Writing children's books connected her to families, but her social media really took off with "Emily's Wonder Lab" on Netflix, which introduced her to a global audience of families with young children.

and science education to a new level with "Emily's Wonder Lab." The show began streaming on Netflix in 2021.

Courtesy photo



Morgantown native reaches new heights with Netflix science show for kids

By Bill Lynch Staff writer  3 min to read

She said her mission is to help kids — especially those who don't see themselves in STEM — realize their potential, much like others helped her make it to where she is today. That's why she doesn't shy away from bright colors and varying message styles in her work.

"I wasn't always an MIT-trained engineer. It took time to convince myself I was smart," she said. "Growing up, many of us lack confidence and sometimes people's insecurity leads them to make others feel lesser to boost themselves. As I got older, I surrounded myself with people who had my best interests at heart. They believed it was OK to try, even if success wasn't guaranteed. Their mindset — 'Somebody has to get the opportunity, so why not you?' — inspired me."

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—Emily Calandrelli

Philanthropy that reaches new heights

Unlike Emily Calandrelli's other achievements, her Blue Origin flight only required three days of physical preparation since the rocket was autonomous. However, she spent the months leading up to the launch raising money and awareness for her home state.

"I knew that it would be such a monumental opportunity [to go to space] that I wanted to be able to use it to help my home state. That was always the goal," she said. "Country roads took me to space. Now it's my job to bring the stars back to them."



Emily Calandrelli meets a young fan at the Huntington Children's Museum on Thursday, Oct. 24, 2024.

WADE SULLIVAN | HD Media



Hundreds meet 'Space Gal' Emily Calandrelli at Huntington Children's Museum event

HD Media  1 min to read

"Country roads took me to space. Now it's my job to bring the stars back to them."

—*Emily Calandrelli*

She highlighted West Virginia fashion designer Jordon Masters at New York Fashion

Week, cleared dozens of teacher wish lists and worked with Marshall University to promote the [Marshall for All, Marshall Forever Program](#), which allows students to graduate from Marshall with a bachelor's degree and relevant work experiences debt-free.

She raised nearly \$40,000 for foster care through the [Children's Home Society of West Virginia](#), a statewide nonprofit providing foster care, emergency child shelters and other services for children across the state.

This was primarily accomplished with a fundraiser, [Starbound Dreams for Foster Futures](#), where Emily Calandrelli took a flash drive with her to a space filled with a list of children's wishes. Another leg of the fundraiser involved her completing [Cameos](#) — paid online shout-out videos.



Emily Calandrelli looks outside of the Blue Origin capsule during her trip to space on Nov. 22, 2024.

Courtesy photo

Rocket Gal

On Nov. 22, Calandrelli was one of six crew members who took an 11-minute journey to space with the private flight company [Blue Origin](#). Fellow West Virginia native Sharon Hagle was also on the flight, her second in two years.



2 WV women blast off to space on Blue Origin rocket, return safely minutes later

Staff report  1 min to read

According to Blue Origin, that mission was the ninth human flight for the New Shepard program and the 28th in its history. To date, the program has flown 43 humans above the Kármán line, the 62-mile high internationally recognized boundary of space.

"Sitting on the launch pad, I thought about my younger self, a girl from West Virginia who didn't see herself as one of the smart kids, who didn't know the roadmap of success," Emily Calandrelli said. "I was so proud of her for persevering, believing she was worthy and feeling worthy of a path like this."

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The rocket's launch from West Texas began with orange, glowing flames



engulfing the vessel on either side. She was pushed back into her seat by the G-forces of the acceleration as her eyes took in a "surreal" transition from bright blue skies to a vast blackness. She recalled the engine "cutting" after about two minutes and experiencing four minutes of weightlessness.

"Floating around the capsule and looking out the window, I saw the deepest blackness I've ever seen in my life. There's no color on Earth that can really describe it," she said.

Emily Calandrelli said the emotions of accomplishing her goal hit her all at once, but added, "it was just the most wonderful feeling in the world."

Back on Earth, she received a long hug from her husband before joining her two children, Rose, 5, and Lincoln, 2.



Emily Calandrelli and her father, Ben Calandrelli, stand in front of the Blue Origin booster rocket shortly after her flight concluded on November 22, 2024 in West Texas.

Courtesy photo





In this screenshot from video, Morgantown native Emily 'Space Gal' Calandrelli emerges from a Blue Origin space capsule in the West Texas desert following a 10-minute space flight on Nov. 22, 2024.

Blue Origin | Courtesy photo

'The stars are within reach'

Emily Calandrelli said her children think it's normal that their mom goes to space and has TV shows. However, seeing her perform experiments on her shows and showing off cute outfits on social media has been impactful for people of all ages across the country as they watch her "make science nicer" and more relatable.

Bailey Hinkle, 10, of Hurricane, said of the space launch, "When I saw a video of [Emily Calandrelli] in space, I was like, 'That's so, so cool and awesome.' And when she went back down from space, it was just so adorable that she found her husband waiting for her."

Watching Emily Calandrelli achieve her space flight dream made Hinkle feel like she, too, could be an astronaut someday.

"I feel like my dream of being the first woman on Mars can come true," she said.

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—*Bailey Hinkle, 10, of Hurricane*

Her mother, Niccole Hinkle, said, "We're so excited to see someone from our state

shine. There is so much in the world right now telling our daughters what they can't do. And along comes Emily showing them that the stars are within reach for them."

Lindsay Rink, who works as the national director of employee benefits communications for a Cincinnati insurance company, said she has followed Emily Calandrelli since 2020. Her two stepdaughters and two sons love Emily's STEM content and experiments.

"Emily is so positive, and the experiments that she does in the demonstrations are so much fun and so simple for kids to figure out how to put together," she said.

But Emily Calandrelli's inspiring content isn't just for kids.



"As a woman and as a mom, I can completely relate to when your kids come into the picture and your focus really goes to them," she said. "It's so cool to watch another woman really embrace what she loves without sacrificing being the mom that she wants to be."

What's next?

For Emily, the sky is not the limit — it's just the beginning.

While she said she hopes to continue inspiring others by writing a book geared toward a new, adult audience, her overarching message will be the same: STEM doesn't just welcome everyone; it needs everyone, and Emily Calandrelli wants to be your

optimistic tour guide.



Morgantown native hopes to inspire kids with STEM-focused book series

Jennifer Gardner 📖 3 min to read

"My goal is to never make anybody feel stupid. A single experience where you're made to feel stupid can turn you off from something forever," she said. "I want you to feel welcome to be curious, to fail, to make mistakes, and to learn. So that's my hope. Everybody is welcome in STEM."

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—*Emily Calandrelli*

Photos: 73 years of West Virginian of the Year



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