Senior editor for the Embryo Project, Erica O’Neil [2], presented a talk “Spectacular Collections” at the Arizona Science Center [3] in downtown Phoenix as part of Unbelievable Biology weekend, April 5th and 6th. O’Neil spoke several times on both days about the history of cabinets of curiosities, elaborate collections of natural history [4] specimens popular among Europeans in the 1600s, and the precursors to modern museums. She brought a number of specimens with her, creating a mini collection of curiosities on stage. Those specimens included insects [5] from the Nico Franz lab [6] at Arizona State University, plant fossils from Kathleen Pigg’s ASU collection [7], and a number of skulls, taxidermy, and geological specimens from private collectors.

During the talk, she focused on the life of Dutch anatomist Frederick Ruysch [8], who in his lifetime created well over 2,000 anatomical specimens for his spectacular Cabinet of Curiosities [9]. The Cabinet publicly displayed jarred specimens and elaborate dioramas composed of animal and human remains until 1717 when it was mostly sold to Czar Peter the Great of Russia. Those specimens would later go on to become the Kunstkammer, the first national museum of Russia, where 947 of Ruysch’s anatomical specimens preserve to this day.

Erica O'Neil on Stage at the Arizona Science Center