

The University of Vermont – Letters from the recipients of the Kate Svitek Memorial Scholarships

The University of Vermont faced an unexpected challenge in 2009! The applicants for the Kate Svitek Memorial Foundation scholarships were so impressive that the Foundation and University decided to authorize an extra grant, enabling three highly qualified students to participate in an internship of their choice.

Dear Svitek Family,

I am writing to thank you deeply for your contribution that has allowed me to complete a summer internship with the North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher (NCAFF). This internship has not only helped me to gain academic knowledge and professional experience, but also to grow as a person and to direct my career path.

As an intern at NCAFF, I worked in the aquariology department and was also a member of the SCUBA dive team.

The experiences that I had at NCAFF are incredibly valuable to me;

opportunities that I considered rare privileges were actually daily responsibilities there! Some 'normal' duties included hand-feeding five enormous Southern stingrays by lifting their velvet-smooth noses and sliding pieces of squid into their mouths, cleaning and feeding six grunting juvenile alligators poised



with their mouths open, ready to strike anything that came within reach, and diving in tropical reef exhibits as small angelfish and filefish nibbled on my hair. I had the opportunity to dive in the 250,000 gallon Cape Fear Shoals tank on multiple occasions, which houses sharks, stingrays, Moray eels, and many species of bony fish. It is an altogether different feeling being on the inside of an exhibit- seeing children and parents waving from the other side of the glass and taking pictures as you are scrubbing algae and cleaning tank windows. As is wrestling two 7 foot long, 500 pound female alligators from their exhibit, carrying them through the aquarium as they are thrashing and clawing, positioning them for weighing, and pinning them for an ultrasound. I befriended a male wood duck named Wilson, who would step up onto my hand and sit on my shoulder. I traveled with the staff to a nearby coastal inlet to collect specimen for exhibit and study, and prepared 2 million-year-old Megalodon teeth, collected by our dive team, for exhibit. I cared for day-old seahorses and baby guitarfish, which is a species that is seldom born in captivity. And while these experiences along with many more made my summer unforgettable, simply the opportunity to be in the aquarium before visitors are admitted each day was a peaceful, personal, and unique privilege, that I will value for the rest of my life.

Academically, the knowledge and skills gained through my internship with the North Carolina Aquarium have provided me with experience in a field in which I previously had none. I feel that this internship has closed any gaps that I may have had in my education in wildlife and fisheries biology by giving me insight into the marine science field, of which I had limited academic exposure. This experience, which would have been impossible without the generosity of your family, has revealed an unknown desire in myself to further explore this field, to perhaps pursue a graduate degree in marine biology, and to discover mysteries of one of the few remaining wild and unknown ecosystems on earth.

Again, I would like to express my gratitude to you for your overwhelming generosity and for allowing me the opportunity to have the experiences I have had this summer during my internship with North Carolina Aquariums at Fort Fisher. Please know that your contribution has made a difference in my life. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Allison Prokop

Dear Svitek Family,

I would like to express my deepest gratitude for the generosity and kindness you have shown me. It was this kindness for someone you had never met that gave me the courage and means to spend my summer doing field research.

I spent my summer as a field research technician working on a USDA-sponsored project through the Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources at UVM. The project was

focused on multifunctional land-use in agricultural areas within the Lake Champlain watershed. This summer was the first stage of the project in which data was collected on site-specific biodiversity while landowner opinions about land-use were gathered in preparation for later stages of the project. I was a lucky member of a six person team of hardworking individuals and one superb supervisor by the name of Professor Allan Strong. Waking up at 3:00am in sometimes rainy, often humid weather was not always



easy, particularly in the first week. Armed with a compass, a GPS unit, aerial photos and a data sheet, I would hike out into the unknown to predetermined coordinates. The points we hiked to were chosen randomly, and were not always easy to reach. But that was half the fun! Without following easily navigated routes, I got to experience some of the most beautiful places I have ever seen in Vermont, places that I would never have even known about and perhaps even some that no one knew about.

Throughout the summer months I tested myself in dedication, stamina, patience, tenacity and skill. With the birds and trees as my guides, and the teamwork of an incredible group of people striving for the same goals, I became empowered and confident in my abilities. I learned how to identify Vermont's most common birds by sight and sound, how to navigate the back roads and backcountry of Vermont, how to lead a team, how to be part of a team, how to learn from mistakes and how to have fun no matter what the weather was, how much the mosquitoes bit or how hard the nettles stung. This was truly the most amazing summer I've ever had, and I know now that I will be most happy in life if I can find a job doing conservation work outside in nature.

Although the field season has ended in Vermont, I have found a place interning at the local lake science center where I participate in animal care and am training to give presentations to the public about natural history. This completely different second experience has made me realize that someday I would like to become an educator in some way, working to increase the public's understanding about the natural world of which we are all a part. I wouldn't have my current internship or have had my summer experience without your family's generosity and encouragement.

Thank you sincerely for everything you have given me and for everything you have given so many others. You are a truly wonderful family!

Eliese Dykstra

Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources