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*Education Interpreter III*

I grew up in Greenville, South Carolina and have always been interested in animals. I can vividly remember having my fifth birthday party at the Greenville Zoo and being so excited to spend my big day among the animals that lived there. I also remember summer camp at Roper Mountain Science Center, where I was in charge of taking care of a guinea pig. I always had pets growing up, from hamsters and fish to our beloved cat named Chipper.

Even though I've always loved animals, it wasn't until I was around nine years old that I realized I wanted to work with them someday. I had the amazing opportunity to go to SeaWorld Camp over the summer and learned about what it was like to work there. I still remember that week as one of the best weeks of my life. Swimming with dolphins, watching a sick otter get nursed back to health, touching a stingray, sleeping next to the whales, snorkeling with colorful fish... it was truly an experience of a lifetime and one that would shape my life. It was one thing to learn about these animals in school, but experiencing up close and personal interactions allowed me to form connections that I would have otherwise never had. It was then that I realized the importance of zoos and aquariums. From rescuing sick animals and creating awareness around conservation to inspiring young minds, like myself, zoos and aquariums are truly invaluable.

All that you can really recognize as a child is how magical these beautiful animals are that share this world with us. It isn't until later in life that the pure awe turns into a passion and drive for protecting these animals we've grown up to love so much. When I was in high school, I had the opportunity to take a marine biology course. Socializing was more important than studying to me in high school, but I still found myself having the highest grade in the class without opening a book. I realized that it came naturally to me only because I was so interested in it. For our class trip, we went to the Georgia Aquarium, where all of my passion and inspiration came rushing back. I was able to apply what I learned in class to the live animals in front of me. After that class, I was certain that I wanted to go to college to study marine biology.

Trudging through organic chemistry and microbiology in college was tough when all I wanted to learn about was dolphins. I studied hard, knowing that it would pay off in the long run. After I graduated, I was lucky to land a job as an educator at the South Carolina Aquarium. Still unclear of what my "dream job" was, I was surprised to learn so quickly that working as an educator was my dream job. Seeing kids' faces light up when they touch a stingray for the first time or see a shark up close, just as mine did when I was at SeaWorld Camp, is something that is simply immeasurable. Having a part in making teens' dreams of working with animals come true and teaching them about how to protect them is the highlight of my career. I see myself in every kid that walks through the door and every teen who applies for our High School Intern Program. Being a part of their journey to conservation is what makes me get up for work every day.

