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Local High School Student Experiences Marine Science Firsthand at Woods Hole Science Aquarium

They came from diverse educational and family backgrounds and from states across the nation, but for Adam Semple of Attleboro, Mass., one of the 11 high school and college students who spent the summer working or volunteering at the Woods Hole Science Aquarium (WHSA) in Falmouth, Mass., it has been a summer to remember.

Semple, a senior at Bishop Feehan High School, says some people have pegged him as “the theater kid” because he has appeared in high school musicals and local theater productions, and assume he will major in theater in college. But he also loves animals and the ocean, and says he is seriously thinking about the marine sciences as a career after his Woods Hole aquarium experience.

Feeding the fish, training the harbor seals, cleaning tanks, leading shore-side collecting trips for the public, and helping children and adults learn about marine animals at the touch tanks were all part of his daily routine. The WHSA, the nation's oldest public research display aquarium, offers two summer programs for high school students who have completed grade 10 or higher, a five-week internship and a two-week career seminar in late July. Both programs are run by the WHSA staff, and are projects of NOAA's Northeast Fisheries Science Center and the neighboring private, nonprofit Marine Biological Laboratory.

Semple participated in the five-week internship program June 30 through August 1. The annual program provides students with the opportunity to work with a professional staff caring for a collection of about 140 species of fish and invertebrates common to the continental shelf from Maine to North Carolina, two harbor seals named LuSeal and Bumper, and sometimes sea turtles held for rehabilitation and eventual release. The interns learn about marine animal husbandry, aquarium operations, conservation, and public education. They are also trained to serve as assistant naturalists on public collecting walks to local harbors and estuaries.

He also participated in the two-week Careers in Marine Science Seminar July 21 to August 1, along with seven other high school students from California, Utah, New York and

Massachusetts. The career seminar students get training in marine animal husbandry and basic aquarist chores, hear presentations from scientists working in a variety of marine fields, go on collecting trips, visit other Woods Hole science institutions, and go on field trips to the New Bedford and Nantucket.

The seminar is designed to give students an idea of what people working in Woods Hole do and how different areas of science contribute to the larger effort to understand the marine world and to manage marine resources wisely.

“I loved being in Woods Hole and being around a mix of people from all over the world,” he said. “There is so much to learn there, and the people know so much and are willing to teach you. Reading about it in books is fine, but having a hands-on opportunity like this is amazing.”

Semple was no stranger to Woods Hole, having spent summers with family in Bourne, visiting the Aquarium and attending summer classes at the Children’s School of Science in Woods Hole when he was younger. He liked the courses related to animals best, and when he heard about the Aquarium internship program decided to apply.

“I’ve learned so much about marine life, about setting up tanks and even about running an aquarium and everything that is involved,” he said. “I really liked working with the animals, especially the seals. It is hard work and not at all like having a dog. You cannot pet the animals. Everything is controlled and has a procedure to follow. Even after just a week here I knew twice as much as I did before about marine science.”

The students was kept busy during the day, and enjoyed many activities together at night and on weekends, from playing soccer and seeing the latest Batman film at the local theater to a bonfire on the beach. They even spent a “Night at the Aquarium,” eating pizza, playing games and sleeping on the conference room floor.

Semple works part-time as a waiter at Bliss Brothers restaurant in Attleboro, and says he will remain active in theater. This past year he was the male lead in the high school production of the musical “Crazy for You” and had to learn to dance as well as sing and act. It was an intense schedule and he loved performing, but was happy to be in Woods Hole for the summer feeding fish, cleaning tanks, teaching young children about the animals and going on collecting trips in local waters.

Although he has not successful in convincing the lead aquarist to set up a tank for jellyfish and to acquire an octopus for the collection, he didn’t stopped trying. He caught several jellies in local waters, and learned why they are hard to raise and maintain in aquaria. As for the octopus, he discovered the Woods Hole Science Aquarium used to have one but it often slipped out of its tank to raid nearby tanks, a problem for those maintaining the populations.

Once classes start at Bishop Feehan in the fall, his course load will include classes in art, literature and psychology, as well as science. He took advanced placement biology last year, and will be taking advanced placement physics this year.

“I’m getting excited about science again,” he said of his experience. “I know I will be back, no matter what career path I choose. I’ve made a lot of connections and hopefully will keep the ties to Woods Hole for many years to come.”

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