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Second Year Celebration Essay Contest

What I Learned from Vultures

Tacked to my bulletin board is a quote from Maya Angelou: “Success is loving life, and daring to live it.” In a similar way, sophomore year is about discovering what you want to do, and daring to pursue it. This is the year where everyone defines their own success, their own passion. Many of my peers want to go to medical school; some want to design robots or do research for NASA. For me, that passion is animals.

In many ways, the internship I was fortunate enough to receive this semester at the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo has provided the cornerstone for pursuing an animal-minded career in the future. Staring up at four African white-backed vultures, utterly perplexed, I began to realize that this wasn't something that many would want to do even if the opportunity were handed to them. When I reflected on the events that had led me to the vulture cage, I was empowered to admit that, even though the journey wasn't easy, it was all worthwhile. Braving Cleveland's classic winter days three times a week to get to the zoo by way of RTA bus 79A was a challenge at first, but I learned to embrace the necessary obstacle if only for the reason that it proved how important the internship was to me. Furthermore, these birds are not characteristically beautiful by any aesthetic standard and from a biologist's perspective are similarly lackluster in their behavior. The data collected show that these vultures spend most of their time scowling from a perch in their damp indoor enclosure, or preening their dull gray, tattered feathers. Yet they inspired me, touched me in a way which helped me to understand that studying animal behavior is the direction I want to go- no matter how many less-than-desirable grades I get on my organic chemistry exams, no matter how cold it is waiting for the bus, no matter how obscure the species. These four vultures allowed me my first real glimpse into this field of biology, but will never

know my gratitude. Looking back, only to be able to count the benefits instead of being defeated by the trials, proves that this year will mark one of the most successful in my undergraduate career at CWRU.

As far as future plans go, the prospects are numerous and exciting. I will remain active in the Case Animal Rights and Ethics Society as well as volunteer at the Cleveland Animal Protective League and perhaps the Natural History Museum, which I recently learned houses dozens of Ohio-native fauna with amazing back-stories. Next fall, Vertebrate Biology will certainly prove to be an important learning experience, and Dr. Willis' Animal Behavior course dangles like a carrot as I look forward to Spring 2010.

However, students at Case are rarely single-minded and usually major in multiple fields. Although I count myself among the lucky who discovered their passion early, my future plans are more complicated and there is still much to clarify. Where does a Spanish concentration fit into a passion for animal behavior? Where will I study abroad? Should I consider veterinary school more seriously? What possibilities have I failed to consider at all? Whereas these questions could be overwhelming and discouraging, I have learned that neither the mysteries about the future nor the challenges of today should be enough to make you change your mind. I have also learned that despite inevitable failures and uncertainties which may cause you to doubt your personal vision, eventually something is bound to victoriously win out. Most importantly, I have discovered the comfort that comes from finding your inspiration in the most unlikely of things.