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Rocking slightly, the boat was within fifteen feet of a grey whale. The marine biologist's dog was watching alertly as her owner pointed, "That's Creamsicle!" Between spotting whales, the marine biologist discussed the research she had done on the residential grey whales of Depoe Bay. I was amazed by her discoveries and how personally she knew the whales. The whales were impressive, but one thought stubbornly ached inside my twelve-year-old body. "I want to be like her". The idea of helping the environment in such a hands on way, well it had me smitten.

I started one of my first volunteer positions at an invertebrate zoo in Colorado when I was sixteen years old. At the time, I was in the midst of my three year battle with leukemia. With a bald head, a volunteer uniform, and a grin, I marched in to start my interpreter/rover shifts. I was often sick from chemo treatment at the time, but whenever possible, I was at The Butterfly Pavilion. By helping kids touch sea stars, and watching adults squeal at hissing cockroaches, I emerged from my shy cocoon. After a six hour shift, my volunteer supervisor once snorted, "You're here more than my employees!"

Working as a volunteer at the Butterfly Pavilion was one of the best experiences of my life. This was one of the first times I felt truly in my element. This opportunity allowed me to be around people that cared about biology as much as I do, and allowed me to share my passion with kids and adults. When I volunteered at The Butterfly Pavilion, I wasn't a teenager with cancer, I was an expert in invertebrates.

I was still exploring career options while in community college, but I knew for certain what I wanted to do once I took an oceanography course. I looked forward to classes, helped my lab partners, and earned 99 percent on my final exam. The oceanography course charged my passion for marine science. I spoke one on one with the professor at my community college to find out what his career was like, and how he achieved it. The more I learned the more set I was to work in the marine biology field.



After this discovery, I decided I wanted to become a marine biologist. I knew I needed to start getting experience as soon as possible, so I started training to volunteer at the Oregon Zoo in September 2018. I was trained in animal enrichment, interpretation, and habitat restoration positions. On a weekly basis, I was creating items for the animals to interact with, and speaking with guests about conservation. Intermittently, I had the opportunities to work in habitat restoration and work with scientists in the field collecting data.

My work with the Oregon Zoo had me surrounded by biology experts, and my conversations with them confirmed the importance of getting experience before graduating college. This knowledge pushed me to study marine science at the University of Hawaii, because I knew that the program is abundant with volunteer and internship opportunities.

Since attending the University of Hawaii at Hilo, I have been taking advantage of as many opportunities as I can. I am participating in the Environmental Sustainability Living Learning Community, and this opportunity has given me networking tools in the environmental conservation community, volunteer opportunities, and friendships with people working for similar goals as myself. I have joined both the Cetacean Club, and the Sea Turtle Stranding Response Team on campus. Lastly, I am the secretary for the Residence Hall Association (RHA). While RHA is not immediately related to my desired field, it has helped me master leadership and communication skills.

I am now cancer free, but I still have barriers to cross when it comes to my education. Chemotherapy has left my family with medical debt, and myself with some residual brain damage and trauma. The brain damage from treatment has made it more difficult for me to stay organized, and develop proper time management skills. These deficits make employment while going to school a challenge. My family is not in a position to assist in providing significant financial assistance, as my mother is my only provider. I am hoping that with some part time employment, and additional financial aid, I will be able to complete school uninterrupted.



I want to use my volunteer experiences and degree to help protect and learn about the very environment that has always inspired me. Now more than ever, the natural environment needs people like me, to protect our environment. I plan to work in conservation and research organizations in order to help the public, and policy makers understand how their actions affect the environment. I would like to go to graduate school, and one day become a professor. I know that this is the right path for me, due to my scientific understanding, communication skills, and most importantly, my passion.