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Minnesotan Heads to Hawaii IWU Grad Works at Dolphin-Research Facility

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--It's not a typical job for a newly minted college graduate.

First, it's in exotic Hawaii. Second, "co-workers" can tip the scales at 400 pounds and measure 8.5-feet-long. And, third, these "colleagues" can have beautifully descriptive names like Akeakamai, Hawaiian for "lover of wisdom," or Hiapo, meaning "first-born son."

For five months, Minnesotan Alisa Conley will be palling around with Atlantic Bottlenose dolphins at Honolulu's famed Kewalo Basin Marine Mammal Laboratory.

Conley, a 2000 biology and theatre-arts graduate of Illinois Wesleyan University, began an internship at Kewalo last month that will give her a first-hand glimpse into the remarkable learning and memory skills of dolphins, "cousins" to television's fabled Flipper.

"I'll be a research assistant to a graduate student or professor," Conley explained in an interview before departing for Hawaii, "working on cognitive learning in dolphins. I'll help with research and training of the dolphins as well as data entry and maintenance of the lab."

Role of Interns

The Dolphin Institute, which is affiliated with the Kewalo Basin Marine Mammal Laboratory, points out that: "Interns are an integral part of our staff . . . Through a carefully designed apprenticeship program, interns work directly with the dolphins and researchers to learn effective dolphin teaching techniques and research skills."

Interns work in all aspects of the program, including exploring dolphin perception, intelligence, and communication; assisting with dolphin husbandry and care; acquiring hands-on experience in dolphin research and training; and receiving an education in dolphin and whale behavior and natural history.

Conley concedes: "I've always wanted to be a dolphin trainer. But, there are so few positions, I gave up on my dream."

However, an essay, phone interview, and strong recommendations from three of her professors won Conley a highly competitive five-month internship at Kewalo. She is one of only seven interns drawn from around the world: Ireland, England, Yugoslavia, Canada, and the United States.

The non-paid internship will help Conley hone some key career skills.

"Those skills," she explained, "will give me the ability to handle a variety of animals and training techniques. They will help me become well-versed in animal psychology and help me relate to animals. I will work with and network with key people in the field."

Conley has been drawn to animals since she was a youngster. Their beauty and love of nature lured her to the world of animals, as well as their ability to adapt to the world around them.

Previous Experience

As a student, Conley eschewed some typical college jobs for experiences that helped prep her for the challenges of Kewalo. She did an internship at Miller Park Zoo, a facility near the IWU campus. That internship turned into a summer job two years ago. Last summer, Conley followed a Miller Park colleague to the world-famous San Diego Zoo, working in the education department.

After Conley completes her stint at Kewalo, she has lined up another internship at the Oregon Zoo in Portland, where she will work at the Birds of Prey show in training and other capacities involving Golden Eagles, Bald Eagles, owls, condors, and similar birds.

When her Oregon Zoo assignment wraps up in December, 2001, she is eyeing a permanent job on the East Coast perhaps at a zoo or a facility like Sea World.

Conley believes her double major of biology and theatre arts has prepared her well for the challenges ahead.

"I found that what I wanted to do is environmental education," Conley explained. "While this doesn't involve performing, it does involve presentations to audiences, especially to children, about the environment and animals. My theatre background has made me at ease in making presentations to people."

Laboratory Background

The Kewalo Basin Marine Mammal Laboratory was founded in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a vehicle to find scientific evidence about the intellectual competencies of Bottlenose dolphins.

"Today," according to the web site of The Dolphin Institute, "we know that the dolphin is indeed a highly intelligent mammal, and we have a much richer appreciation for and understanding of its intellectual specialization and abilities."

Dolphin Studies

Kewalo is home to four Bottlenose dolphins, which have done much to expand understanding of dolphin cognition, communication, and sensory and perceptual abilities.

According to The Dolphin Institute's web site, Kewalo's dolphin, Phoenix ("rebirth"), for example, has participated in memory studies, showing an immediate recognition of different

melodies played in various keys or octaves. Elele ("ambassador" or "messenger"), another dolphin, has participated in echolocation studies, showing that the animal's sonar is well developed and that dolphins can listen to echoes returning from objects and from that information perceive the form of those objects.

Bottlenose dolphins live in temperate or tropical waters in all of the world's oceans. Some live near coasts, while others live further offshore. They are fast swimmers, deep divers, and skilled fish hunters. Dolphins can live into their 40s or 50s in the wild or when housed in a marine facility.

About Conley, IWU

Conley, who is from the Minneapolis suburb of Plymouth, is a 1996 graduate of Osseo Senior High School in Osseo, Minn.

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls more than 2,000 students in a College of Liberal Arts, and individual schools of Music, Theatre Arts, Art, and Nursing. Since 1994, these facilities have been added to the IWU campus: a \$15 million athletics and recreation center, a \$25 million science center, a \$6.8 million residence hall, a \$5.1 million Center for Liberal Arts, and a \$1.65 million baseball stadium. A \$26 million library and an \$8 million student center are under construction.