

After leaving his two-year career as an educational zookeeper at Sunset Zoo in Manhattan, Kansas, Matthew Milholm came to West this year to start his first year teaching agriculture and Green Tech.

"I was at Kansas State University and I was in the college of agriculture and one of my friends was a full time keeper there and my sister was an educational zookeeper while she was in the vet school," Milholm said. "When she left, that opened up a position and so I decided to go and be an educational zookeeper."

Being an educational zookeeper gave Milholm an excellent jump-start to his teaching career. Not only did it expand his knowledge of exotic animals, he now has the opportunity to teach his students a similar curriculum.

"I got to work with anybody from ages 4 to 60, to teach about animals, where they came from, [and] how to take care of them," Milholm said. "That also included me doing all of that work if there was nobody there."

Being a zookeeper and a full-time college student at K-State made it so being a keeper was not a full-time career, but was nearly enough hours to qualify as one. He was also able to balance college and a job efficiently by using his motivation and passion to teach and applying it to his part-time job at the zoo.

"It was not a full-time job because I was still in school but I did work about thirty-five hours a week," Milholm said. "It's not a full-time job, but I did it basically full time."

Milholm enjoyed teaching students and having the ability to travel to their schools with the animals. He also helped with critically endangered species at the zoo through advocating and teaching about how individuals can help the population of the animals in the wild grow.

"My favorite part was bringing animals to schools that students would never really be able to see," Milholm said. "I had a screech owl named Screech that a lot of students had never even seen before because they really only come out at night. I could hold them in my hand and students could come up and look at them and learn about where they came from."

Teaching agriculture, horticulture, and coaching the Future Farmers of America program gives Milholm the opportunity to teach about livestock animals, including sheep, cattle, goats, and chickens, to his classes. With his background knowledge of the exotic animals at the zoo, Milholm enjoys adding an occasional exotic animal to his student's curriculum to keep them engaged with the rest of their class time.

An additional perk that comes with having a zookeeper background are the connections Milholm has with some of his friends that are still keepers at Sunset Zoo.

"I'm still friends with a lot of the keepers at that same zoo so there's been times where I've just phone called them or video chatted them and been like 'hey, we want to know something about this animal', and they'll just walk over to that animal and we'll have a discussion about those," Milholm said. "I FaceTimed one of my old keepers the other day in one of my classes and we talked about cheetahs with cheetahs right behind her."

Students engage with Milholm frequently about his previous job, asking him questions and looking through photos that he has saved on his phone over the years. Luckily for Milholm, his students enjoy learning about the exotic animals he's worked with, and he can easily connect their questions to their current curriculum.

"In the position that I was in as an educational zookeeper, I had some background in animal science but I was able to get into that position," Milholm said. "A normal full-time keeper [would] normally have to have a degree in some sort of sciences, there is a science in zoology but also a majority of zoos require you to have a very, depending on the animals you work with, intensive internships or things like that."

Being a zookeeper may appear as a fun and non-typical job, however, there's a lot of hidden responsibilities that come with the job. Milholm described it as a very 'white washed' career. One downside includes the fact that, as a zookeeper, you can expect multiple years with very little pay, which causes entry level employees to easily be pushed out from the lack of proper financial compensation.

"Zookeeper life is very difficult. It is glamorized in the media, but it is a very hard, selfless job and it is very demanding on the body and time and zookeepers don't ever really get a day off," Milholm said. "They have to work on Christmas [and] Thanksgiving because those animals are still there, they still have to be taken care of."

Milholm's previous job was fitting for his college major, along with his current career as a teacher. All of the knowledge he gained as a keeper was comfortably added into his curriculum, giving his students a periodic break from their normal day-to-day learning.