

MYSTIC AQUARIUM

Speakers: Justin Richard

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P.O. Box 3066

Monument, Colorado 80132

877-825-5234

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>> JUSTIN RICHARD: I started volunteering at the aquarium because at the time my goal was to be a Marine biology professor and so what better way to get that experience then to help out with the education here at the aquarium?

From there I became really interested in what they were doing with the marine mammals so I started volunteering with the whales and dolphins and absolutely fell in love with it.

I was able to do a couple of internships while I was in undergrad and had my foot firmly in the door by the time I graduated.

So I worked here as a beluga whale trainer for a little over eight years. During that time I became really interested in beluga whale research and decided to pursue a graduate degree at the University of Rhode Island.

As a beluga whale trainer, a huge part of my job was educating the public. I really enjoyed working with kids especially. I had some opportunities to help out developing curriculums for Boys and Girls Clubs of America. I especially enjoyed working with students who visit from the Point Lay community in northern Alaska when they visit Mystic Aquarium on an exchange program.

Really what I most enjoyed from an education standpoint at the Mystic Aquarium was working with the college internship program. It is such a unique program compared to some of the other internships that are available in that there is real emphasis on career training. There is a lot of hands-on experience in our internship program.

I am a product of the internship program here and there was a lot of value in kind of pain that forward and being an intern

mentor myself for many years and it is something that I really treasure.

Currently all of my PhD research is being conducted at the Mystic Aquarium and so I have had the unique opportunity to get access to the beluga whales here and rely on the wonderful training and veterinary staff to collaborate with my research.

The value of conducting the research here at the aquarium is that we can build a solid scientific foundation that we can then apply to wild beluga populations.

This research would not exist without the support of the Mystic Aquarium. The unique talent of the staff here and the ability to train these animals to such a high degree, the wonderful facilities here really makes this research possible, of course along with all the people who have served as mentors to me and who have helped me along in the research process and helped to give me these opportunities.