

Ecology Expert AND Humanitarian

Poking through the foliage in her backyard forest, a curious eight-year-old crouches down to inspect some interesting vegetation. Captivated by this newest plant discovery in her personal wildlife sanctuary, young Valerie Gehn had no idea that this keen fascination in exploration and the outdoors would eventually blossom into a fervent dedication to preserving the natural world.

Now a junior biology major at UW-Eau Claire, Valerie has been able to maintain the same zeal for nature and the environment as when she was a little girl. Throughout middle and high school, she was able to continue fostering these passions by taking part in several outdoor recreation programs and excursion experiences. Not only did those extracurricular involvements solidify Valerie's love for living things, but through one FFA botany activity, she was able to discover her particular affinity to flora.

By the time Valerie began college, she was already confident in her choice of major and had already begun to narrow her focus to the study of plants and conservation. But the University Honors Program student wasn't about to limit her nature know-how to the confines of a classroom petri dish—instead, Valerie was intent on letting her knowledge of ecosystem preservation spread its roots beyond the university.

Last summer, for example, Valerie held an internship position with the Lake City DNR field station, where she was able to help monitor the vegetation species of the Mississippi River as a part of a government-funded study.

Now Valerie will be able to utilize her scientific research experience abroad as well. After being selected among a pool of other worthy biology students, the nature enthusiast will spend her summer months in the Galapagos Islands—a true botanist's paradise—within the Charles Darwin Research Station. Working alongside fellow UW-Eau Claire students and former biology professor Dr. Deb Freund, Valerie will be helping to restore native habitats and vegetation to the exotic landscape.

Even though Valerie has found her niche in the study of plants, she plans to apply her knowledge of botanical preservation to human beings as well.

This May, Valerie has needed to rely on the discipline and dedication she's demonstrated through her biology studies in order to complete her first ever marathon. As a direct reflection of her humanitarian goals, the Honors student ran as a part of Team World Vision—a nonprofit organization that seeks to deliver underprivileged populations with clean water and other basic necessities. So when Valerie's exhausted body crossed the finish line after 26.2 grueling miles, it wasn't just a physical accomplishment—it was one that supported global relief and sustainability.

After observing plants her entire life, the future botanist has discovered exactly what it means to experience true growth. Beginning her journey as an inquisitive youngster in her backyard woods, Valerie has matured into someone who knows how to make a difference as both an ecosystem expert AND humanitarian...and that's pretty powerful!