

My Happy Hollow Internship Experience By Ava Woodbury

As I returned to Happy Hollow Park & Zoo for my internship, I was instantly reminded of numerous childhood memories. I remembered the joy and excitement I felt every time I visited as a kid - of climbing Redwood Lookout, of feeding the goats and of riding the carousel (specifically on the eagle). Now, walking past those same rides and exhibits, everything felt smaller than I remembered, but not any less magical. It was a surreal experience to return to a place that had once meant so much to me, only this time, not as a visitor, but as someone ready to give back to the place that helped shape my earliest memories.



From day one of my internship at the Happy Hollow Foundation, I felt like a valued member of the team. The staff at the foundation were welcoming, encouraging and always willing to share their knowledge. My supervisor took the time to understand my interests and goals, and tailored my responsibilities in a way that gave me both guidance and room to grow. All of this support meant a lot and it gave me the confidence to take on new challenges and step outside of my comfort zone.

So as the days went on during my internship, I learned so much about all of the work that is put in to make Happy Hollow such a wonderful place. This made it such a joy for me to come to the office everyday and feel like I was contributing to make this zoo such a magical experience for many other children. During my days as an intern, I would do many different tasks and help others in the office in any way they needed. While some tasks like writing cards and uploading photos could be pretty tedious, I got work on many other projects that were very rewarding.

One of the most unexpected projects I worked on involved building a “mudhead” for the iconic Danny the Dragon ride. I remembered this ride from my own childhood,

especially when walking through the magic tunnel, so getting to add something to the ride was very exciting and it was truly a full-circle moment. Although it was not something I was expecting to do when I first started, it was very fun and I was very happy to feel like I was leaving my own mark in Happy Hollow.

Another highlight of my internship was participating in Senior Safari, one of the Happy Hollow Foundation's community engagement events that invites seniors to enjoy a special day at the zoo. Being able to witness Senior Safari truly showed me how much joy the Happy Hollow Foundation brings to people of all ages. I talked to many seniors who explained to me how excited they are to come to Happy Hollow once a month and how it brings them so much joy every time they come. Seeing firsthand how this place continues to bring joy across generations was a powerful reminder of the Foundation's impact and the importance of the work being done behind the scenes.

What made this experience so special wasn't just the tasks I completed, it was the people. The staff at the Happy Hollow Foundation are some of the most passionate and compassionate professionals I've ever met. They care deeply about the zoo, its animals, and the community it serves. Their dedication inspired me daily and showed me what it means to work in a mission-driven organization. I felt supported every step of the way, and I learned more from casual conversations and team meetings than I ever could have from a textbook.

As my internship comes to an end, I'm filled with gratitude. Not only did I gain valuable skills in communications, event planning, and nonprofit operations, but I also gained a deeper understanding of how a place like Happy Hollow operates behind the scenes and just how much heart it takes to keep that magic alive. Most of all, I got to be part of a mission that brings happiness to families, children, and even seniors across the region.

