

The Pixar movie that I was scared of as a kid is the reason that I want to become a marine biologist. When I was in elementary school, my family and our family friends would all rent a beach house together and stay there for a week. Every year, we would watch *Finding Nemo* and every time we watched it, I was afraid of the sharks in the movie. Even though sharks were one of my favorite animals at the time, I was always scared I would run into one when I was in the ocean. However, on a later beach trip in middle school, I had to face my fear when I saw a real shark while swimming. This experience gave me a big change in perspective and I realized that humans do more harm to sharks than sharks do to humans. From then on, my empathy towards all animals as well as my hard-working mindset has led me down the path that I am on today.

When I was 16 years old, I was diagnosed with autism and ever since, I have seen the world differently. I often tend to feel emotions more intensely than other people, which also causes me to have more empathy in certain situations. For example, my empathy has given me a big connection with animals. For example, I received my first pair of guinea pigs in 2019 from a friend who provided us with a pet store cage. After doing additional research, I soon realized that the cage was too small for the space requirements that they actually need and I built a bigger custom cage for them to have a more comfortable environment. In 2018, we went whale watching in Victoria, Canada, which was one of the most memorable experiences of my life. The highlight of that trip was seeing a pod of orca whales in the wild, which led me to think about how orcas are held in captivity in marine parks. Like the pet store cages that are marketed towards guinea pigs, the enclosures provided to these animals in these parks are very small compared to the vast distances these animals swim in the wild. My passion towards the welfare of animals made me realize that I had to work to change these issues if I wanted to make a difference. My empathy has also given me more insight on bigger issues in the world than individual animals. In class last semester, we were watching a video about the effects of climate change for the future of our planet. I was really moved and I was trying not to cry in front of the class as I thought, “How can I make a difference to this huge problem as just one person?” However, with my unique perspective and deep concern for the environment, I realized that I can make a difference if I work hard enough. My hard-working and thorough mindset have made me stand out from my peers. I was in the honors program in both high school and college, even graduating Summa Cum Laude from community college before I went to ODU. I also have had a lot of volunteering experience and participated in many service projects. One of the ways that I was able to use my unique skills to help me in these projects was in May 2023 when I helped in a James River cleanup. Since I have a good attention to detail, I ended up finding trash that the others had missed and was able to keep that additional trash out of the river and ocean.

Since I have more empathy and a greater attention to detail than most people, I know I have a lot to bring to the table as I further my career in marine biology. With my compassion towards the natural world, I can identify problems that might have gone unnoticed by others and with a thorough mindset and willingness to work hard, I can find solutions to those problems. Overall, I think marine biology is the right path for me because I will be able to help both people and animals with my work.