



Marine biologist alumna brings California connection and expertise to JMU's annual biosymposium

The first time Christine Preston stood before a group of students and faculty presenting her biology research paper, she was one of a half-dozen student presenters at the first "Biosymposium" in 1992.

This year, Preston ('92), a marine biologist and researcher in California, was in a presenter-pool of nearly 10 times as many JMU students at the 2004 Biosymposium. This time, Preston was the main guest as the keynote speaker.

Since leaving JMU, Preston earned a doctoral degree in marine biology at the University of California, Santa Barbara and conducts research at the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute into the life cycles of microbes living in hot and cold waters in Monterey Bay. The research requires her to go on the bay occasionally to collect samples and return them to the lab.

Sample collection is nothing new for her. She started her collecting for research as an undergraduate when she signed onto a research cruise to the Bahamas. She was able to collect a sponge on that cruise that she used for research.

In preparation for the cruise, she obtained certification as a scuba diver, but learned that she needed an additional research diver certification. She had to stay at the surface as a support person to the other divers.

When she enrolled in the University of California graduate program, Preston obtained the research diving certification.

Ocean research during the past 12 years has taken Preston from Hawaii to the Antarctic.

She credits JMU and biology professors Ivor Knight, Bruce Wiggins and Jon Monroe with encouraging her to become a researcher. She worked in Knight's lab as an undergraduate, and she has said that experience helped her find "my niche" as a researcher, and the chance to travel in pursuing the research.

Before her presentation, Knight gave Preston something he has held onto for a dozen years -- her first field research notebook from the sponge-gathering cruise. It was the first time she has held it since she wrote it.

Preston, a native of Pittsburgh, says she originally enrolled at JMU not because of academics, but athletics. JMU had an archery team and she wanted to pursue the sport. She was on the U.S. National Archery Team her last year at JMU and just missed making the U.S. Olympic Team.

She intended to study human health science, but after her first microbiology and botany classes, she was hooked on biology. Much of what she recalls from her years at JMU was taking her classes in "biovillage," an area of temporary trailers set up as offices, labs and classrooms on the east side of Interstate 81 while Burruss Hall was being renovated.

"Ten minutes between the quad and biology trailers was always tough to make back to back classes," she said.

Preston said previous trips back east have included visits with her archery teammates, but this was her first time back at JMU for an extended period of time, giving her a chance to see the campus again. She was impressed with JMU's growth during the past 12 years and said as a Californian, while back east, she had to explore her favorite getaway spots near Harrisonburg.

"I took off the day after and traveled out [Route] 42 to Riven Rock for a hike," she says. "How beautiful it was to see green-covered hills dotted with cows, deciduous trees and fresh running water."

-- Dan McCauley