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UW-Platteville student works with cheetahs in South Africa

PLATTEVILLE, Wis. – For some University of Wisconsin-Platteville students, summer is devoted to spending time at home with friends and family. For others, the three-month break gives students the freedom to study abroad or participate in internships, co-ops and research projects. This summer, Gabrielle Johnson, a UW-Platteville senior, was able to do both through a short-term study abroad opportunity.

Johnson, an animal science major from Peoria, Illinois, spent two weeks in South Africa helping native animals and learning hands-on what it's like to be a veterinarian. Traveling with study abroad organization Loop Abroad, Johnson was selected as part of a small team that volunteered at Feracare Wildlife Centre in Bela-Bela, South Africa, caring for cheetahs and other African animals.

By following a study abroad model instead of a voluntourism model, Loop Abroad focuses on educating its students so that they can contribute and serve in meaningful ways. It also works with locally-run animal welfare organizations so that students contribute to long-term improvement on the ground in the countries they visit.

This wasn't the first time Johnson traveled through Loop Abroad, however. In fact, this was the third study abroad experience that she participated in with the organization.

"I first learned about Loop Abroad in the fall 2014 semester through the Pre-Vet Club here on campus," Johnson said. "At that time, Loop Abroad only traveled to Thailand, so I took a trip in the summer of 2015 and another trip the following

summer. Last year, Loop advertised a South Africa trip starting in the summer of 2017. As an alumna of the program, I found out about the trip through an alumni email before it was released to the public. I jumped at the opportunity.”

Since only a small number of applicants are chosen for Loop Abroad’s veterinary program, most students are selected based on their transcripts, admissions essay and professional references. However, since Johnson was already an alumna of the program, she was simply able to enroll in her desired trip. Johnson and 26 other students from across the United States arrived for their two-week journey at Feracare Wildlife Centre in early June.

While volunteering at the center, Johnson and her team fed the cheetahs, built mounds out of sand for the cats to climb on and cleaned the animals’ camps. She was also able to travel to Kruger National Park to observe African wildlife such as zebras, leopards, African elephants, giraffes and many other types of African mammals and other wildlife.

“Loop Abroad gave me a chance to fulfill a lifetime dream and changed my life for the better,” Johnson said. This experience once again showed me how different the world is. Every place I have traveled so far has been different, and every place has its own unique cultures and traditions.”

Although her most recent study abroad opportunity lasted only two weeks, Johnson is confident that her experience gave her knowledge and friendships that will last a lifetime. Now back at UW-Platteville for her last semester of undergrad, Johnson believes that the practices she learned in South Africa will not only help her in the classroom, but provide that extra push when applying for vet school in the future.

“This experience provided me with keen vet experience that I wouldn’t be able to get elsewhere, and I hope it provides a helpful push into getting into vet school for the fall of 2018,” Johnson said. “This experience has also taught me to never stop exploring; you will always learn something new no matter where you go.”

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