Student Success: Liv Gripko
Prestigious Undergraduate Research Position at the American Museum of Natural History

Undergraduate biology department research student, and Thomson Research Fellow, Liv Gripko, was selected to participate in a prestige research position at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, last summer. Needless to say we had a few questions about her incredible opportunity!

How did you find out about the American Museum of Natural History research opportunity?
I actually found out about it my freshman year, I was searching around online for internship opportunities to build my experience and help me explore my passions. When I came across it, the deadline to apply had already passed though, but I kept it in the back of my mind for next year. Sophomore year came and I applied, but I actually didn’t get accepted. I could not let such a great opportunity pass by though and keenly re-applied the following year (junior year). That would be the last year I could apply also, as you can’t apply if you are a senior, so to say the least, I was anxious. Thankfully, I was accepted (after a phone interview); that was a happy day!

Side note: Though I found this internship myself, I have actually recently seen this particular opportunity circulate through the Parkside email to all biology faculty/staff, students, so it’s very important for students to be checking their email! You never know what great opportunities you may come across!

What gave you an edge over the other applicants?
I honestly believe what gave me an edge over the other applicants, was my passion and personality. I think my previous experience (some of which is my independent research I have at Parkside) helped get me on the ‘short list’, but ultimately during the phone interview I tried to relax, be myself, show my charisma, and especially express my passion and enthusiasm for Biology. I explained to her (my mentor, the interviewer) how my passion and curiosity for science has been with me ever since I was a young child. My mom even has a picture of me, when I was five years old, assembling a rabbit skeleton I had found in my grandpa’s woods.

There were quite a few research options. Do you focus on one or several?
Yes, I only focused on one particular research project. During the application you could specify your first and second choice on which research project you would like to carry out. My research was to reconstruct the inner ear structure of extinct carnivorous mammals from their fossils. From the reconstructions I could analyze the morphology (shape) of the inner ear and infer the animal’s locomotor style and also map their phylogeny. Though I only worked on my own project, all the interns would meet weekly and discuss each others projects, it was a great learning experience all together.

Was there research you were doing at Parkside that related to a project at the American Museum?
There is research I am doing at Parkside that I think helped me get the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) internship, being that I had research experience and all, but the research I am carrying out at Parkside doesn’t relate to the project I did in New York. The subject matter and topics are quite different. My research topics at Parkside: For two semesters, I sampled the aquatic invertebrates at a recently restored wetland at Samuel Myers Park in Racine.
By analyzing the invertebrate biodiversity, I could tell if the wetland is headed back towards a healthy ecosystem after its restoration. My other project at Parkside for the past year or so, which I constructed myself, is researching how parasites affect snail behavior/movement. I presented both research projects at four conferences last year some of which were Posters at the Rotunda in the Madison Capitol, and the National Council on Undergraduate Research (NCUR) in Asheville, North Carolina. I am presenting my snail research at NCUR again this April in Memphis, Tennessee. Ultimately, in my career, I am interested with being a research scientist/field biologist in the field of animal cognition/animal behavior, particularly studying mammals.

How cool was it staying at “Kings College”?
Oh my gosh, staying at Columbia University was amazing!! It is the most beautiful campus ever! I found myself almost taking more pictures on-campus than I did out in the city. The architecture and landscaping was gorgeous and there are so many beautiful sculptures, statues, and other art. You can totally feel the history on campus. I’d really love to pursue my doctorate at Columbia... we’ll see!

Were you able to enjoy New York?
Was I ever able to enjoy New York! It is such an amazing city and I am so happy I got the chance to explore it! I worked at the museum from 9am-5pm Monday through Friday, so I had after work every day and then the weekends to explore New York. I visited so many shops, restaurants, museums, zoos, concerts, all of Central Park, etc. A few of my friends I made there that live in New York or New Jersey said that “I had visited more places than they ever had, and they’ve lived there their entire life”! I pretty much conquered Manhattan. I also visited Queens, Harlem, and New Jersey. I was very surprised in fact, I found New York not to be how everyone makes it out to be, “a dirty city full of rude people”; it was very clean and all the people were very nice. That was one of my favorite things to do was talking to the locals. It is such a melting pot of different, beautiful, interesting people, with so many different stories.

What were a few highlights of the experience that really stayed with you?
A few highlight experiences that stayed with me? Oh, how could I possibly choose!? I had an amazing time my experience at the museum, and my experience exploring the city. Ultimately, my highlights of the city: simply walking around, exploring, talking to the locals. You can discover so much cool stuff just within an afternoon, wandering around. Visiting Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty was pretty epic too, though. My highlight at the American Museum of Natural History: being able to explore around the museum (that place is HUGE), having access/seeing the specimens and artifacts that are behind the scenes, getting to work alongside several acclaimed scientists and simply having the privilege to work on this prestigious research project, having mentors that taught me skills and techniques in research (we had a class every Monday morning), and getting advice and tips for applying for grad school.

It was an honor to be selected to carry out this research. I am still currently working on it remotely with my advisor, expanding the sample size and running further analyses. When we are completely finished, I will actually be publishing the results, which is a huge honor, to be an undergraduate student already having a published a scientific article. I also, submitted my abstract to present my research at an international conference and I just found out that I have been accepted! I will be presenting my research in Perth, Western Australia in July at The 12th International Mammalogical Congress! I am so excited!