



Zoo Edition Archives - Fall 2006

Excerpts from an interview with E.J. Hook, WPZ Operations Supervisor

WPZ: What is your job title and what duties does that entail?

EJH: I am the facility operations supervisor at the zoo and that involves managing four work groups: Horticulture, Grounds Maintenance, Systems Maintenance (heating/cooling, water systems, etc.) and Pest Control. It's all the stuff that isn't directly working with the animals, but helps to support the animals, the zoo visitors and the staff. Systems Maintenance includes the life support systems and pools around the zoo — all the stuff that keeps the animals healthy.

WPZ: What kind of training and education do you have?

EJH: I have a Bachelor of Science degree in Landscape Horticulture and Design and an Associates' degree in Ski Area Management (that was good for a few years as a ski bum, but I didn't make much money!). I have other certifications, such as a pesticide license and I am certified as an irrigation auditor. I also own my own environmental consulting company. Much of what I know, I learned through experience over 28 years in the field — the school of hard knocks teaches me well, much more than books. I needed the book background to get where I am, but I needed the experience in the field to put it all into practice. I had four years of landscape experience before I went to college — it made all the difference to have practical experience first and then apply the academic knowledge to what I already knew.

WPZ: What was your first job?

EJH: My very first job was as a busboy in a restaurant when I was 14 years old.

WPZ: What's the best part of your job?

EJH: The people I get to work with everyday!

WPZ: What are the biggest challenges of your job?

EJH: The biggest challenge is balancing the multiple needs that are out there in the zoo — the staff needs, zoo visitors' needs, facility needs, animal needs and the aesthetic (it's got to look right!). All those things, including safety, have to be thought of and balanced to find the one solution that meets everyone's needs. But that's also one of the most fun things about the job — you need to problem solve and be creative to accomplish your work.

WPZ: What do you think are some valuable skills and strengths needed for this position?

EJH: You have to work well with people, you need a good general knowledge of a lot of technical things, and you have to understand how things work and how they fit together. You need to learn from the past and anticipate the future in order to act correctly today.

WPZ: What advice do you have for kids interested in a career at a zoo?

EJH: It's very important to go out and get your hands dirty and try to see what the career really is before you decide that's the direction you want to go. What you might assume the job entails or what the "glamorous" parts of the job are, might be an illusion — you need to experience it to know how you actually fit with a job and if you truly enjoy it. It's most important to enjoy the job so you can have a sense of fulfillment from it.