

Home, passion, career unite students

Four future veterinarians from Hardin County connect at Auburn

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Feb 11, 2020

Eden Tharpe, left, Shelby Highbaugh, Associate Dean of Academic Affairs Dr. Dan Givens, Vasiliki Wilk and Marie Noel pose for a photo after a white coats ceremony at Auburn University. The four students originally are from Hardin County and intend on graduating from the College of Veterinary Medicine in May 2021.

Submitted photo

Four future veterinarians at Auburn University in Auburn, Alabama, not only share the same career prospects, but the same county of origin.

Eden Tharpe, Marie Noel, Vasiliki Wilk and Shelby Highbaugh originally are from Hardin County and enrolled in graduate school in the College of Veterinary Medicine at Auburn.

They were among 115 within their class who received their white coats in a ceremony, which, according to the college's website, " ... honors the transition of professional students moving from classroom and laboratory education ... to clinical education."

Each plan to graduate in May 2021.

All four students said their interest in veterinary medicine began when they were young, growing up in Hardin County around different animals and tending to their family farms.

Tharpe graduated from Central Hardin High School in 2013, and she first became interested in being a veterinarian after watching veterinarians come to look at the cattle on her family farm.

She started volunteering at the Elizabethtown Animal Hospital when she was 16 and then began a co-op there her senior year of high school.

Tharpe would continue to work there even when she was working on her pre-veterinary medicine degree at Western Kentucky University, but finished when she started at Auburn.

Noel, who was home schooled, earned her bachelor of science from the University of Kentucky in animal and equine science.

She said she had an experience with her family's veterinarian when she was 14 or 15, who asked if she thought she would look into being a veterinarian.

"I knew I wanted to do a career that centered around animals, but wasn't sure what that would look like," Noel said.

Wilk, who graduated from John Hardin High School, received her undergraduate degree from Murray State University in agricultural sciences with a pre-veterinary track.

She said she can remember wanting to be a veterinarian since she was 4-years-old, working on her family's farm.

"Having those opportunities to, you know, be around animals my whole life and help take care of them. I think that's what kind of kept me on that track," Wilk said.

Highbaugh is from Sonora and graduated from Central Hardin High School. She studied at Western Kentucky University and double majored in chemistry and agriculture.

"I absolutely love helping animals in need but also helping the people who care so much about their animals," Highbaugh said in an email.

At the beginning of the graduate program, all four students found out they were from the same county.

"Maybe like orientation week or in the first few months of school we realized, 'Wow, we are all from definitely the same area,'" Noel said.

While some of them knew each other casually from going to some of the same schools, they were not all acquainted with each other until they arrived at Auburn.

Wilk and Noel both lived in Rineyville. Wilk's father was even a pastor at the church Noel went to, but their paths had never crossed until now.

"It definitely takes the pressure off," Wilk said. "Coming to Alabama, you don't really know anybody in your class for sure."

Highbaugh said having other people from Hardin County within her class has been a great asset.

"It's also hard having our families seven hours away," Highbaugh said. "But knowing that if we needed anything, we could rely on each other to step in, helps ease that stress."

Tharpe said her experience at Auburn has been positive since her professors are helpful and there are many hands-on experiences.

Auburn gives in-state tuition rates to Kentucky residents who are accepted.

The list to apply and be accepted into the graduate veterinary program at the university includes having a minimum 2.5 GPA, 500 hours of veterinary experience, a graduate record examination test and three letters of recommendation.

Applicants then must attend a 30-minute interview with the admission committee.

After that, it's simply waiting to see what the results are.

According to Auburn's 2019-20 tuition calculator, tuition as an Alabama resident for the College of Veterinary Medicine taking 9 or more credit hours would be \$10,294.

For non-residents, it's \$24,122.

Noel said the opportunity to attend Auburn with in-state tuition is a blessing, and said it is something she often thinks about.

“If I had to take out out-of-state loans, I’m not sure I would have been able to come to vet school,” Noel said.

Highbaugh felt the same way about her education.

“I have worked all throughout high school and undergrad to pay my way and without the in-state tuition I have a feeling I would not be here today,” Highbaugh said.

However, the four of them each have their own post grad plans – some of which want to come back Hardin County.

Tharpe said she wants to work for a private practice in mixed animals, large and small. After working for a while to pay off loans, she would like to open up her own practice in Hardin County.

Noel said she would like to practice small animal medicine once she graduates.

“I think my passion and the reason that I love this career so much is that it’s an opportunity to really serve people and make relationships with people in your community,” Noel said.

Wilk said she wants to start her practice after graduation, predominantly with large animal and equine, and would like to open her own large animal veterinarian service in Hardin County

Highbaugh said her goal is to return to Sonora. She said she would want to work at the Helmwood Veterinary Clinic where she previously learned from veterinarians there.

“I would just love to give back to the community that has given so much to me,” Highbaugh said.

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