

Start At SVCC, Go Places

April Harris has a cool job. She is the Land Management Supervisor for Jefferson Memorial Forest (JMF), located in southwest Louisville, Kentucky. Covering 6,500 acres, it is the largest municipal urban forest in the United States.

Harris is a 2010 graduate of Park View High School and a 2011 graduate of Southside Virginia Community College's Honors Program. After completing her Associate's degree at SVCC, she received her Bachelor of Science degree in Biology from Longwood University in 2013 and completed a Master of Science degree from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2016.

SVCC proved to be a perfect choice for Harris. Because of taking college courses during high school through Dual Enrollment, Harris was able to complete an Associate's degree in two semesters.

She said, "I chose SVCC primarily for its affordability. I did not want to be a student who graduated from college swimming in debt. Also, I was accepted to the Honors Program at SVCC which challenged me intellectually and helped financially."

The Honors Program is designed for students with a 3.5 or higher grade point average and offers college scholarship, a mentor, challenging course work and in-depth study.

"SVCC is a wonderful school to start your college experience. The classes are small, professors really get to know their students and are there to help," she said. She added, "To me they functioned not only as professors but as mentors," noting she received invaluable help with the admissions process and transferring to a larger university.

Longwood University was the next stop in the educational process for Harris. She noted the college has a rich sense of tradition and community. She was particularly happy to have the opportunity to grow and explore the major she had chosen, guided by expert faculty.

At VCU, Harris found a place "full of life and diversity." She noted that the ecological research conducted there is some of the best in the state. She said graduate students are allowed amazing opportunities to pursue research that both challenges and inspires.

During her time at VCU, Harris was able to study in the coastal plant ecology lab. She was able to do field research on Hog Island, a barrier island off of Virginia's Eastern Shore. Her thesis focused on the differential response of barrier island dune grasses to species interactions and burial. She noted that barrier islands are on the forefront of sea level rise and climate change.

All of this preparation and education aided Harris in her current job. Within the JMF, there are about 50 miles of trails that allow people to hike, mountain bike, and horseback ride as well as just enjoy nature and picnic in picturesque areas. She notes that her role within the Forest is to preserve and restore the forest and trails. In order to accomplish this, park workers assist her along with AmeriCorps team members and dedicated park volunteers. With the assistance, they are able to

conduct trail maintenance, remove invasive species, and restore natural habitats through prescribed burns, tree planting and litter clean up.

“Within the last 90 days, we have planted a total of 500 trees with another 100 still to be planted. With managing so many acres and miles of trails, I stay pretty busy,” she said.

Harris is a long way from Mecklenburg County but still has family ties including her parents, Mike and Karen Harris of South Hill.