

Meet the mascots: Mike the Tiger of Louisiana State, HokieBird of Virginia Tech, the Trojan of Virginia State, Smokey of the University of Tennessee, and of course, Johnny Paws of Southside Virginia Community College. Paws was born on January 1, 2013, and named by a student who won a contest and in honor of then SVCC President John Cavan. Since then, many have 'played' Johnny so here is the story of just one former SVCC mascot.

Suppose you chose a college to explore careers and ended up becoming the college mascot, too. This was the journey of Jared Hurak of Farmville, Virginia who reminds those starting college this fall to make friends and participate in the activities like he did at SVCC.

"Do not hesitate to be friendly with people! Yes, we all go to college to get a degree, but if the opportunity presents itself, do not pass it up. College is a social environment as well as professional one so make some friends," he advises.

A self-described hyperactive person, Hurak said with time between classes, he volunteered to help Student Activities Coordinator Le'Tina Giles with events. Hearing about a need for someone to don the Johnny Paws costume for Panther Prep Day, Hurak and a friend filled out the paperwork with plans to share the responsibilities of being the big cat at the all-day event. A week before the date, he learned his friend had not completed the paperwork and he would be the lone Panther.

"I had not planned to be Johnny Paws the entire day and internal panic ensued. I proceeded and am glad I did," he notes.

He remembers, "My first time as Johnny Paws I had no idea what I was doing. I had received some pointers from one of the people who had been Johnny Paws before me, but that did not help with how nervous the prospect of being in a mascot suit in front of strangers and friends alike made me. Looking back on it, I was overthinking things and was fretting over my social skills not being good enough to be a college mascot. Once I was actually in the mascot suit, I was not nervous anymore."

He continued, "It dawned on me that no matter how nervous I was, it would not show and certainly would not help me. Therefore, I proceeded to put some of the pointers I received into practice and was astonished at their effectiveness. I mostly greeted people, made exaggerated movements, and posed for pictures, but these simple things made so many people smile and laugh that it made me happy that I went through with it."

The only downside of being the mascot is how hot the suit is in warmer weather, he noted. Otherwise, being Johnny was a great experience.

"SVCC helped me develop my communication skills immensely. Fresh out of high school, I was somewhat shy and always afraid to talk to new people; yet, thanks to the faculty and my fellow students at SVCC I became far friendlier and more conversational than I ever have been," said Hurak.

He also was a member of the Gaming Club and participated in other activities. He stresses to new and old students to make friends and spend time with them but finish your schoolwork first.

Hurak does not see college mascot in his future. He plans to continue his studies at a four-year university and hopes for a career along the lines of preventing wildlife extinction, especially among large mammals. I guess that includes panthers!!

