


Life is a ZOO for vet tech grad

Donna Jones Todd (1977) offers pretty good career advice: Find something you're passionate about because you'll be doing it day in and day out for many years. You don't want your job to become "just routine."

She has lived out her own advice in a career spanning 36 years as the veterinary technician at the Jackson Zoological Park. "I feel like I got my dream job," she said. "Hinds Junior College set my path in motion. It's been a great life. I'm so lucky."

She has maintained that connection over the years, attending conferences at Hinds, making presentations and mentoring student interns.

"I love working with the students and the interns. ... When I get interns, I'm learning. I'm teaching them about exotics but I'm learning about new things coming along," she said.



*Todd and Jari,
a gibbon she helped raise*

Vet Tech chairman Dr. Bobby Glenn said Todd was an excellent student and her continued involvement at Hinds is appreciated, especially the opportunity for students to visit zoo facilities. "She has been a great asset to our program," said instructor Dr. Kirby Sills.

Todd didn't have a clue what she wanted to major in when she graduated from Florence High School in 1974 and headed over to what was then Hinds Junior College with her best friend. She spent the first year in general education courses before she heard about the new vet tech program Hinds was putting together.

She loved animals and thought it was something she could pursue as a career. Todd finished in the first graduating class, which was also Glenn's first year.

After a year at a local clinic, she heard the zoo had an opening for a certified vet tech. Thanks to the new Hinds program, Todd was qualified.

While working with "exotics" is like caring for any other animals – "A tiger is just a bigger cat," Todd says – it is a specialty that is learned by doing. The first week or so she was working at the zoo, a Siberian tiger, the largest of the species, was being examined. A team including Dr. Ray Sullivan, who was the vet on contract at the time, was assembled and the tiger was tranquilized.

"Of course, I'm the new, green person in the group. I'm just about to die because I'm going to get my hands on a tiger; I'm going to get to touch a tiger," she said. "Here I am, having the best day of my life. Well, the exam is going along, and I'm sitting there thinking how wonderful this is and how great this vet is and these zookeepers are all in tune with this animal.

"About that time, this tiger moves a paw. I look around, I grab everything and I head for the exit and everybody is yelling, 'Hey, come back. You've got the tranquilizer!' I'm like oh, OK. And back I go."

Of course, Todd soon understood that animals can move a paw while they are sedated and it didn't mean the tiger was waking up.

Another time she was helping hold a python that was being sutured. "I thought I was holding that snake but that snake was more like holding me. It struck at one point with me holding onto it, and it pretty much took me with it," she said. "You learn real quick you've really got to pay attention."

Over the years she has raised many zoo and wildlife babies that needed short-term human care for one reason or another. "I've raised raccoons, and cougars, and cheetahs. And giant anteaters. Wallabies. A clouded leopard," she says, ticking them off in her mind.

When her daughter Anna Leigh was a baby, she and husband Chris, former photography director at The Clarion-Ledger who now works freelance, were caring for a bear cub the zoo had at the request of the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks.

"I begged my boss to let me care for it," she said. "One night Chris hears this 'waaahhh.' He's like, 'Is it the kid or the cub?' Because bears can sound like humans. He said, 'You get the bear, I'll get the baby.' So we're both up feeding."

All the work is not glamorous or fun, of course. Some of it includes cleaning stalls or hauling hay, keeping mounds of medical records and working all holidays and snow days so the animals can be fed. And when an animal dies, it's painful. "You grieve them when they pass even when you know it's coming. Those are hard things. In some cases, you've cared for them for 30 or 40 years," she said.

The job is not all about giving to the animals. Sometimes she gets back. After a second round of chemotherapy a few years ago, Todd dragged herself to work. She had lost her hair and wore a cap. She felt physically and emotionally drained.

"I remember crying that day because I said I'm no good to anybody," she said.

But she picked up Pogo – a Schmidt's monkey – whom she was helping to raise. He cuddled with her and put his arm around her. "I loved that little hand on my shoulder because that day I was feeling down. I saw that if nothing else, I could comfort another little creature," she said. «



Todd with an anteater