

New beginning through education

Not long ago, Dan McNeill was heading down a wrong path, in a dying industry with no future. He realized his only hope was a new beginning through education.

McNeill always loved the ocean – he grew up in a fishing family and that’s where he hoped to make his career. He gillnetted salmon and herring, long-lined halibut and black cod and dove for sea urchins. He developed a keen interest in shellfish, but when BC’s fishing industry began to decline, he knew he needed to make changes.

McNeill left his family home in Skidegate, Haida Gwaii (Queen Charlotte Islands), a small First Nations community of about 1,000 people, and enrolled in the Fisheries and Aquaculture program at Vancouver Island University.

Today, as he heads into his third year of studies at VIU’s Nanaimo campus, he’s one of the program’s “star students” according to Dr. Helen Gurney-Smith, research scientist at the Centre for Shellfish Research (CSR).

McNeill showed potential early on. He was hired as a research assistant in the CSR laboratories after his first year. He continued working throughout the school year as a work-op student. Last May, he received a top national award for student researchers – the coveted Undergraduate Student Research Award (USRA) from the Natural Sciences Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC).

Valued at \$6,500, the award keeps McNeill employed in the CSR lab this summer, working with Gurney-Smith and her research team on a study into the best methods to cultivate the native cockle.



“I’m learning so much,” said McNeill. “When I first came to university, my goal was to open my own oyster farm, but my plans have totally changed since working with Dr. Gurney-Smith and others. Now I’m leaning towards a career as a hatchery technician, or perhaps in scientific research. I’m still figuring it out. All I know, is that I’m gaining excellent research experience at VIU.”

“Dan has been an invaluable addition to our cockle research team this summer,” said Dr. Anya Epelbaum, a scientific researcher at the CSR. “I believe Dan’s knowledge and tremendous interest in aquaculture combined with hands-on research experience will prepare him to become an expert in his field, whatever career path he chooses to take.”

It’s the mentoring and one-on-one interaction with faculty that has motivated and inspired McNeill to ‘pay-it-forward’ to younger First Nations students in BC. McNeill worked as a facilitator for the CSR’s Future Leaders on The Water (FLOW) five-day summer camp for youth, held in Nanoose over the past two summers.

“The objective is to introduce First Nations youth to science and leadership, and inspire them to consider future jobs in aquaculture,” he said. “I love working with kids. Hopefully, years down the road, if one or two of them end up in the Fisheries and Aquaculture program, we’ll know we did our job.”

VIU offers diploma and degree programs in Fisheries and Aquaculture. For information, contact chair Mark Noyon, at Mark.Noyon@viu.ca.

Fisheries and Aquaculture student Dan McNeill is heading towards a promising career in aquaculture.

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