

Passion for horses turns into a career for human services alumna

by Carlyn Brown - Thursday, January 19, 2012

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/16534/passion-for-horses-turns-into-a-career-for-human-services-alumna/>

University of Wisconsin Oshkosh College of Education and Human Services (COEHS) alumna Erin Wilkum '11, worked hard to get where she is just 10 months out of college.

The key to her post-graduation success was internships, she said. As a student, Wilkum worked at the Boys & Girls Club of Oshkosh and the Oshkosh YMCA in after school and summer programs. In June 2010, Wilkum began interning as an equine specialist at the CHAPS Academy in Shiocton, WI.

What drew Wilkum to CHAPS was her belief in their mission and approach of using horses as a way to connect with children and families struggling with emotional and/or behavioral difficulties. Upon graduation from UW Oshkosh, she was offered a full-time position with CHAPS as the operations team leader.

In Wilkum's own words:

What is CHAPS Academy?

“CHAPS is a nonprofit organization that serves children and families that struggle with emotional and behavioral difficulties through creative counseling and equine-assisted mental health activities. Our service is unique and clearly has an immense impact on our clients.

“Each client goes through a “picking process” with the horses where one horse in our herd picks the client. The horses consistently pick clients with similar diagnoses or attitudes. One horse picks sad clients and another picks aggressive or overconfident clients. This process engages the youth and makes them feel special. In sessions, the horses reflect the energy given off by the client, and provide a bridge to talk about things standard office therapy would have a much harder time getting to.”

How did UW Oshkosh prepare you for your job at CHAPS?

“UWO prepared me in every aspect of my position at CHAPS. I learned solid skills in the classroom that helped me be successful in the organizations with which I worked. I was also able to get my foot in the door of an agency I plan to be a part of for a very long time.”

What are your duties as operations team leader?

“I wear many hats in my position. I am primarily responsible day-to-day operations of CHAPS Academy. Along with being in charge of marketing and community outreach, I also write newsletters, chair our fundraising events and update our website.”

What is your advice to current COEHS students?

“Get your resume started and continue to update it as you get involved in things. Secondly, make sure you remember that everything you do is networking. When you make that first impression with a person, make sure it is a positive one. Also remember to stay aware of your priorities and keep them in focus

when making the choices. And enjoy college, meet people and get as much as you can from it—college is a great time in life and there isn't another experience like it.”

Learn more:

- [CHAPS Academy](#)
- [College of Education and Human Services](#)