

Undergrad zookeeper's job is otter this world

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For most people, college is a means to an end, with the goal of landing a good job after graduation. For Tulane University student Dominique Fleitas, that box was checked before she took her first class. For the last six years, she's been a zookeeper in charge of the otters at the Audubon Zoo in New Orleans.



Student Dominique Fleitas is a zookeeper who rehabilitates baby river otters that were rescued and brought to the Audubon Zoo in New Orleans. (Photo by Ryan Rivet)

Fleitas, a senior [environmental biology](#) major, started out as a volunteer and then an intern in the zoo's swamp exhibit in 2006. In 2007, when she was 18, a full-time position opened. Fleitas approached her boss and asked to be named the zookeeper in charge of the otters. To her surprise, she got the position and has been the otter keeper ever since.

"When you're a kid, you hear people say, 'I'm going to be an astronaut,' but no one actually does it," Fleitas says. "I said 'I want to be a zookeeper,' but I didn't think that was a job you can actually attain. I was shocked when I realized this isn't just a dream job, it's actually something you can do."

Fleitas says she tends to learn more in a hands-on environment than she does in a classroom setting. She's taking advantage of an opportunity to travel to Ecuador for

a [public-service class](#) this summer, something she sees as beneficial to both her job and her studies.

“We're going to be working with some naturalists in Ecuador and some members of the local community as well,” Fleitas says. “I'm looking forward to seeing how they go about educating the children and working with the community to save the resources for the next generation.”

Fleitas plans to receive her degree next spring, but says she doesn't see herself leaving the zoo anytime soon.

“I love what I do,” Fleitas says. “I have my otters, so I'm really content.”