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Press Release



Nick Grzenia

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Forests & fire--part of the learning experience: **Internship helps Grzenia plan his future**

"I can't wait for Tuesdays to come," said Nick Grzenia, a UW-Richland student from Middleton.

Tuesday is the day Grzenia devotes to an internship working with Department of Natural Resources Richland County Forester Mike Finlay. Because the internship takes him outdoors, where he's happiest, may be part of the reason. Tuesdays can mean sudden excitement, too.

Take, for example, St. Patrick's Day, March 17.

"I was in the office when the pager went off. We headed to a six-acre grass fire near Viola," Grzenia said. "Three fire departments were there doing fire suppression. The incident commander told me what to do. I had an eight-gallon, 40 pound water tank on my back. First, I helped with building a line to prevent the fire from spreading. I worked to prevent the forward spread of the fire. Later, I helped mop-up hot spots. The grass had burned into a timber stand." He spent the last part of the day cleaning things up with a chain saw.

It's not your typical classroom activity, but it's part of Grzenia's study program this spring and he's earning UW credit for this active learning.

While this kind of work could be dangerous, it's work he's well-prepared to do. In addition to a radio and special equipment to keep him safe, Grzenia had completed a basic fire-fighting training as part of his internship prior to spring grass fire season.

As a high school student, Grzenia knew he wanted a career in some area of natural resources. He considered wildlife ecology and forestry. This internship as a first-year college student has helped him decide.

Finlay, the forester Grzenia and other UW-Richland interns have worked with, said the he provides students with real-life lessons about on-the-ground work of a forester, a career for people who like to spend time outside in the woods, and who also have communication skills to educate people. “I do my job and the interns observe.” Interns have examined timber, cruised it for volume, marked it for sale. They go with Finlay when he meets with landowners to assess trees and recommend good forestry practices for timber stand improvement.

“Nick’s doing a great job,” Finlay said. “He’s attentive. He asks good questions. He’s good at putting the pieces together to understand the whole picture.”

Grzenia learns, too, from others at the forester’s office--Jake Elder, also a forester and a UW-Richland alumnus, and Todd Kenefick, a fire ranger.

To help Grzenia make connections between the terms and theories he learns in classes and the experiences and observations he makes as an intern, his internship supervisor UW-Richland associate professor of biological sciences Dr. Scott Walter has him keep a journal. Walter, who teaches natural resources courses, also checks in with the foresters to monitor Grzenia’s progress.

“This internship has helped me a lot,” Grzenia said. “My family owns 450 acres—300 in a forest management plan. The county forester helps us with this and, now, I get it.”

Grzenia plans to deepen his understanding next year with a forestry-related research project involving the family forest. His plans include examining sapling regeneration in an area that’s been cut, comparing it to a mature area. He will also consider soil type in his research.

“The internship—as a freshman—is a valuable opportunity,” he said. “It’s helped me a lot. I’ve loved it. And Scott (Walter) is all-around supportive.”

Walter said, “I’m glad to work with students to make these experiences happen.” For more information about the natural resources program at UW-Richland, contact Walter, who serves as academic advisor to students majoring in natural resources. His phone number is (608) 647-6186, Extension 105 or send e-mail to scott.walter@uwc.edu .

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