

My Wild Career as a **CARNIVORE KEEPER**

Before becoming a carnivore keeper full time, Young attended the Houston Zoo's Keeper Camp and volunteered as a member of the Zoo Crew

Cy-Fair grad Josh Young finds his life's passion in caring for some of the world's most majestic creatures at the Houston Zoo

Written by Leigh Ann Mitchell

Photo by Kristyn Robertson

Howls, growls, roars, squawks, and barks fill your ears as you enter the Houston Zoo. Every visit is a new adventure for zoo-goers, but imagine if that exciting adventure happened every day. For Cy-Fairan Josh Young, there's never a dull moment with his four-legged co-workers in his role as carnivore keeper at the Houston Zoo. Young's work days are spent providing care for some of the zoo's most amazing animals, including lions, tigers, jaguars, and bears. For him, these adventures make up just another day at the office.

Zoo Crew Aspirations

For some, it can take a lifetime to find their passion, but for Young he knew the path he wanted to follow by the age of 12. That summer, he attended the Houston Zoo's Keeper Camp, where he worked alongside the keepers, helping prepare food and assisting with tasks. While at camp, Young noticed teens working there, too, as part of the Zoo Crew.

"They were volunteers," he shares, adding, "I was very interested in being part of this program, so I talked with the education department. When I was 13, I applied and was soon part of the Zoo Crew." Young volunteered during the summer and liked it so much he asked to work on weekends during the school year. He was a member of the Zoo Crew throughout all four of his years spent at Langham Creek High School.

Chasing His Career Paths

After graduating from high school, Young decided to apply for a position as a keeper and was hired immediately. He also pursued a college education, earning a degree from the University of St. Thomas. In May 2011, Young celebrated his 10th year at the zoo.

All of his volunteer experience set Young up for great success as a keeper. "Sometimes when people come into zoo keeping without prior experience or knowledge of this field, they have a skewed view of what this field is all about," he says. "There is more to this job than just feeding and caring for the animals. There are many chores to be done, and they can be quite nasty, like cleaning up animals' waste, keeping the exhibit tidy, and performing daily maintenance. You are also outside in the elements - rain, wind, extreme heat, and frigid temperatures."

With so much experience under his belt, though, Young says his was a very smooth transition. "Really, I just changed uniforms," he shares. "I went from wearing a Zoo Crew shirt to wearing a zoo keeper shirt. I also got a set of keys. There were no real surprises."

Another Day at the Office

A typical day for Young starts at 7 a.m. At their morning meeting, zoo keepers discuss that day's work and any animal issues, before being assigned to their various sections. Once they have their assignment for the day, keepers make sure animals in their section are counted, fed, and checked for medical issues.

After tidying up the animal's exhibit, enrichments - items whose purpose is to pique the animal's curiosity - are introduced. These are sometimes cardboard animals made by summer campers out of old boxes and filled with treats and meat by the keepers. Keepers also provide animals with scent, auditory, and visual enrichments within the exhibit. Once animals are taken care of, the day is filled with keeper charts and presentations, animal trainings, projects, and daily maintenance. The typical work day ends around 4 p.m.



Young helps train an Indochinese tiger

An Unpredictable Job

Working with any wild animal can be hazardous, since they are very unpredictable. "It is a dangerous job, and I have had some pretty close calls," says Young. "That's why you have to keep focused, pay attention, and, [most] importantly, be aware of the temperament of the animal

you are working with." Luckily for Young, he still has all 10 fingers and toes and says most injuries are typical office mishaps. "We smash our fingers, get cuts, or drop things on our toes," he explains.

Though an animal's unpredictable nature can be dangerous, it can also be entertaining. Lions are perhaps the most majestic animals Young cares for and always entertain him. When students in a keeper camp made a giant giraffe for an enrichment project, the lions' reaction to their new neighbor was unexpected and entertaining. "The giraffe must have been 10 feet tall," recalls Young. "We put treats in it and thought our big, bad lionesses would attack it. They were actually terrified and wouldn't go near it. One lioness would nudge the other as if saying, 'You go get it.' One finally got the courage to approach it and hooked her paw around a leg. When she did, the entire thing fell and all of the lionesses ran away and hid for about an hour. Eventually, they came out of their hiding places and found the treats. It was hilarious."

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A Special Bond

All keepers have animals assigned to them to train. They work on primary behaviors and build trusting relationships, learning the animal's "language" and what makes them tick. They become each animal's go-to person if anything happens.

Young's relationships with the animals he cares for are unique. Every keeper has a favorite animal, and in turn, every animal has a favorite keeper. "I have a special bond with our lioness, Calisto," says Young. "I've been working with Calisto for eight years. When I first started working with her, she hated me. Eventually, I gained her trust, and she warmed up and got used to working with me."

Advice for Future Keepers

For young Cy-Fairians thinking about a career in the field of animal science, the Houston Zoo is the perfect place to begin that journey. Young recommends this career to those who are passionate about animals and the outdoors, and even those who want to go into the animal behavior or veterinary science fields. He shares, "By volunteering on the Zoo Crew or becoming an intern, you figure out if this is really what you want to do." CFM

LEIGH ANN MITCHELL is a graduate of Southwest Texas State University with a degree in biology and a minor in English. After seven years as a middle school science teacher, she is now a stay-at-home mom living in the Cypress area.

Photo by Kristyn Robertson

**Become a
HOUSTON ZOO VOLUNTEER**

In addition to its amazing staff, the Houston Zoo is also looking for Zoo Crew Volunteers

- Between 13 and 17 years old
- Commit to volunteer a minimum of 32 hours
- Volunteer at least four eight-hour shifts on project dates, one project day (Saturday) a month
- Provide your own lunch and transportation to and from the zoo
- Have excellent interpersonal skills and enjoy interacting with children and adults
- Attend an orientation session
- Pay a \$25 registration fee at orientation to cover the cost of uniform items, materials, and educational opportunities

For more information, call 713-533-6500 or visit houstonzoo.org/teen.

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- Marketing
- Nature Swap interpretation
- Environmental
- Education
- Human resources and volunteer programs
- Houston Toad Program
- Horticulture
- Membership
- Purchasing
- Facilities management
- Special events
- Interactive marketing

For a complete list of opportunities, visit houstonzoo.org/internships or call 713-533-6558. All internships are unpaid, unless otherwise noted.

Young and Taji, an Anatolian shepherd who lives with the cheetahs at the zoo

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