

VIMS trains interns in oyster aquaculture

By Erin Kelly

Program graduates fifth straight year-class in support of growing industry

(October 23, 2013) The Virginia Institute of Marine Science recently celebrated the graduation of four emerging professionals needed to advance Chesapeake Bay's rapidly growing oyster-farming industry.

This year's graduates from the Oyster Aquaculture Training Program (OAT) at VIMS were Marisa Franks of Williamsburg; Cyrene Grover of Lisbon Falls, Maine; Janet Hanson of Largo, Florida; and Jim LaChance of Beverly, Massachusetts.

The program—funded by an anonymous donation to the VIMS Foundation—is a six-month training program designed to help meet the demand for trained staff in the oyster-aquaculture industry, and to aid in VIMS' own oyster-domestication programs.

Created in 2009 by Dr. Stan Allen, Director of the Aquaculture Genetics & Breeding Technology Center (ABC) at VIMS, the program runs throughout the oyster hatchery season—from April to September—and is built to teach the trainees all of the various stages of oyster aquaculture by rotating them through hatchery, nursery, and farm grow-out activities.

“The program gives the interns a broad understanding of oyster aquaculture and the skills needed to perform tasks in both oyster hatchery and field operations,” says Allen. “What's more, each of the interns are essentially adopted by the staff in ABC, thus providing seasonal help for the busiest time of year in the VIMS research hatchery.”

ABC Field Manager Nate Geyerhahn spent a substantial amount of time with the interns and says the program is a mutually beneficial resource for the trainees and ABC staff. “For ABC, the trainees become part of our team and provide us with willing and capable help during our season. For the interns, ABC provides a vehicle to connect with the industry and introduces them to the fundamental skills required to advance in the field.”

Trainee Marisa Franks says aside from the invaluable experience and knowledge gained over the past few months, working with the ABC staff was one of her favorite aspects of the program. “The entire ABC staff took



OAT Graduates and ABC: (L to R) Director of ABC Stan Allen poses with OAT Graduates Janet Hanson, Marisa Franks, Jim Lachance, Cyrene Grover, and VIMS Hatchery Specialist Amanda Chesler and ABC Field Manager Nate Geyerhahn.
Photo by Erin Kelly

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each of us in and truly wanted to educate us,” she says. “Not only did I gain the confidence to work within the oyster aquaculture field, but I gained some amazing new friends as well.”

“This year’s interns were unique in that they all had experience working with oysters prior to the program,” says VIMS Hatchery Specialist Amanda Chesler. “Some had worked on oyster farms, while others had collected wild oysters and worked on oyster-restoration projects. Now that they have completed the program, they’re all leaving VIMS with the skills needed to successfully work as an oyster aquaculture professional.”

A self-professed lover of the ocean, trainee Cyrene Grover says she was instantly intrigued when she found out about the program. “I’ve wanted to pursue this career path for a long time, and the program gave me an in-depth and comprehensive foundation to build on in order for me to reach my ultimate goal of one day owning my own oyster farm.”

Trainees Janet Hansen and Jim LaChance came into the program hoping to gain knowledge, experience, and a solid understanding of what it takes to make a good oyster, and how to farm them. Now that the program has come to an end, LaChance says he hopes to be able to help the aquaculture industry continue its healthy growth.

“All four of the trainees have different professional goals, but I believe that they share three important qualities: an inquisitive mind, a strong work ethic, and a good sense of humor,” says VIMS Hatchery Specialist Lauren Gregg. “By completing the OAT program and adding their training to that foundation, they’ve set themselves up to be successful and to make a strong and positive impact within the industry.”

While the program is designed to give general training in the field, hatchery, and lab, Gregg says the ABC staff also tries to support each intern in their own particular interests as well.

“We try to tailor as much as possible to each individual and their professional goals so they’re able to get what they want or need out of the program,” she says. “If at any point the interns found themselves with a particular area of interest—or a potential career opportunity—we did our best to provide them with more in-depth information and training to suit their needs.”

Funding for the Oyster Aquaculture Training program was made as a donation to the Virginia Institute of Marine Science Foundation, a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization that supports the education and research missions of VIMS.



Finished Product: OAT Graduates (L to R) Marisa Franks, Janet Hanson, and Jim LaChance celebrate the end of a successful internship, and a very impressive oyster made entirely out of tape. Photo by Erin Kelly