



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Jacob Smith holds two of his more than a hundred books on animals at his home in Hermiston. The autistic 22-year-old has built up an encyclopedic knowledge of animals and wants to work as a zookeeper.

Encyclopedia of Zoology

Jacob Smith, 22, hopes to put knowledge of animals to work for their preservation

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

If you strike up a conversation with Jacob Smith about animals, he'll tell you that a tiger's skin is striped like its fur, and that a polar bear's skin is black. He'll tell you where a specific animal's native habitat is. And, if you ask further, he'll tell you whether or not that animal is on the endangered species list.

Smith, 22, has loved animals since he was a child. His passion, aided by the intense, single-minded interest that often comes with autism diagnoses like his, has led him to zoos and aquariums all over the country. He even volunteered at the Oregon Zoo during his last years of high school.

"I like zoos and how they educate and conserve," he said.

Someday, Smith hopes to be a zookeeper. There aren't many job shadowing opportunities for aspiring zookeepers in Hermiston, but he's raising money to attend the American Association of Zookeepers Conference in Washington, D.C., in August. There he will spend a week mingling with zoo staff, volunteers and enthusiasts learning about zookeeping and animals.

The trip will include a behind-the-scenes tour of the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, which is only open to the public one weekend per year. Smith's mom Jeana Beck said seeing the endangered animals there is what he has talked about most.

"He's been telling me about it for 10 years," she said.

Some of those endangered animals include a breed of wild horses from Asia, cheetahs and red pandas that the Smith-



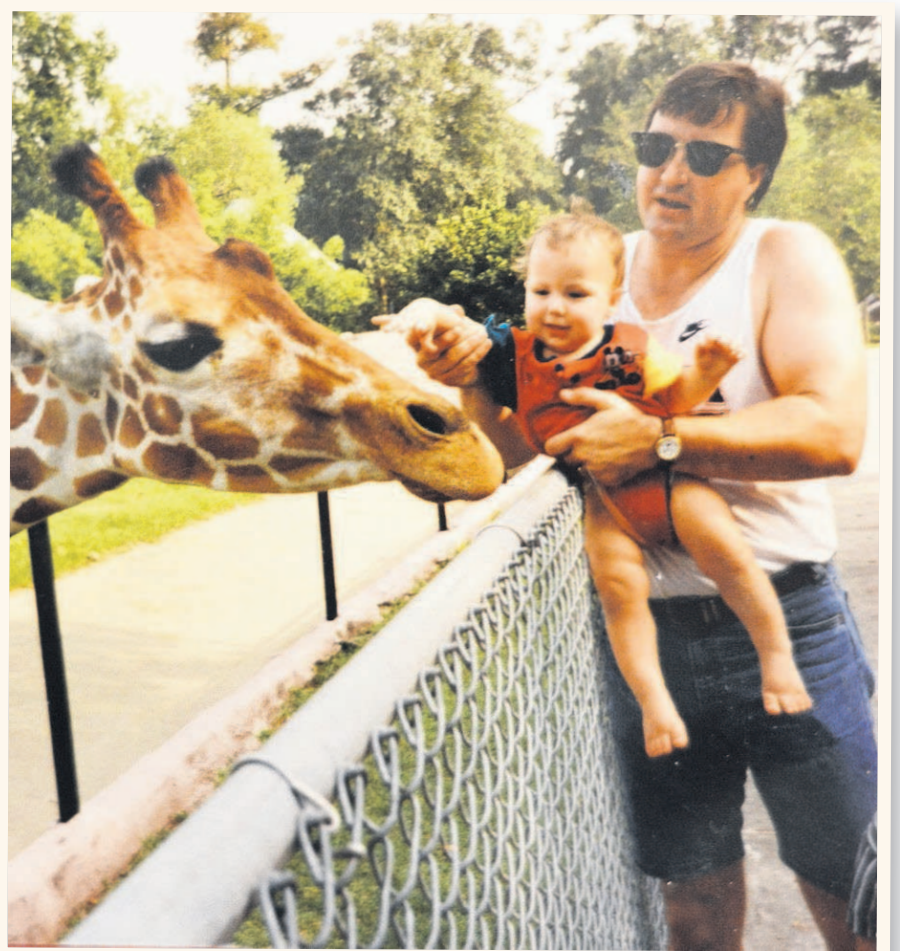
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Jacob Smith volunteered at the Oregon Zoo during high school while living with his father in Portland.

sonian is working to save. Ninety-nine percent of all animal species that have ever lived on the planet are now extinct, Smith said, and he worries a species like orangutans or red pandas will be next.

"Unfortunately red pandas (reduced in number) last year," he said.

One endangered species Smith knows a lot about is polar bears. He spent his first three years of high school at Hermiston High, but lived with his dad in Clackamas to attend a life skills program there for two more years. During that time, Smith volunteered at the Oregon Zoo. When he wasn't feeding the goats



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Jacob Smith, 1, with his father, Darrell Smith, at the Baton Rouge Zoo in 1995.

he was a "polar bear talker" who stood by the exhibit and educated people about the world's largest land predators.

He said he was sad to hear that the polar bear Tasul died of cancer in November, leaving the Oregon Zoo down with just one polar bear.

The first zoo Smith ever went to was in Baton Rouge, where he was born. And one of the first inklings his family had of his love of animals was when they checked out an encyclopedia of animals at the library there.

"He just clung to that book," Beck said. "I ended up paying the library for the book because he wouldn't let go of it. He wore the binding right off."

Later, at about age eight, on a drive-through safari at one of their favorite zoos in Gentry, Arkansas, Smith started pointing out the different types of antelope and saying "That's a nyala" or "That's a kudu." When Beck checked his book, she realized he was right about the different breeds. So she started buying him more books and documentaries about animals.

During Smith's childhood Beck also became an advocate for autism awareness. She co-founded the nonprofit Unlocking Autism and convinced former Miami Dolphins quarterback Dan Marino to attend one of their rallies in Washington, D.C., urging Congress to fund more research into autism's causes and treatments.

Smith, meanwhile, continued to add to his extensive zoology knowledge. In addition to his large collection of books and DVDs, Smith also has the wide world of the internet to learn whatever he wants to know about various species. He can watch YouTube videos about the okapi, which looks like a cross between a zebra and an antelope (but, Smith pointed out, is actually a closer relative of the giraffe), or read about the Center For Great Apes (which, Smith said, is the home of the chimpanzee once owned by Michael Jackson).

Smith said as a child he loved going to SeaWorld, circuses and rodeos, but since then some of the documentaries he has watched has changed his mind about things like the use of elephants at the circus.

"I just feel animals shouldn't just be used for entertainment," he said.

He is working to find a job in Hermiston, but in the meantime is raising money for the zookeepers conference by selling his mother's jambalaya and promoting a GoFundMe account at www.gofundme.com/jacobsmithzooconference.

"He knows he's got to earn his way, and it's going to be expensive, but it will be worth it," Beck said.

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Jacob Smith, 8, pets kangaroos at the Wild Wilderness Drive-Through Safari in Gentry, Ark. in 2002.