**PERSONONAL, BACKGROUND, and FUTURE GOALS STATEMENT**

Growing up in a small beach town along the Gulf coast has no doubt shaped me into the person I have become today. From an early age I spent countless days exploring the bays and estuaries of Texas via the pursuit of hunting and fishing. It was through those experiences that my passion for coastal ecosystems began to grow and take hold. This exposure, driven inherently by my love for the outdoors drove me not only to deepen my knowledge of biology in academia but also to actively contribute to the preservation and health of local ecosystems through the practice of scientific inquiry, a goal I am proud to say that I have accomplished at Texas A&M University - Corpus Christi (TAMUCC).

Immediately upon attending TAMUCC I began reaching out and inquiring to a multitude of professors with the hope that one of them would have an opportunity for me to conduct research. To my luck, the two professors I asked, Dr. Simon Geist and Dr. Christopher Bird, welcomed me into his lab with open arms. Dr. Geist’s lab, and the subsequent project I helped his graduate student with by the name of Olivia Robson involved assessing the vertical distribution of planktonic larvae in the Port Aransas Inlet system. In particular, my role with Olivia centered around processing all of the samples she collected via boat tow, by individually removed and taxonomically identifying all zooplankton within each sample down to a genus and species using a compound light microscope. Unfortunately, at the end of my second semester in his lab, Dr. Geist returned to Germany to pursue a career in private-sector hatchery science consulting. By that time, however, I had completed all of my work with Oliva, which ultimately contributed to her M.S. dissertation and a subsequent published article for which I was not a co-author.

While working in Dr. Geist’s lab, I was also heavily involved in Dr. Bird’s Genomics Core-Lab, where I executed a range of molecular biology protocols to support internal and international research projects. My responsibilities included performing Sanger sequencing, PCR, gel electrophoresis, fragment analysis, bead cleanups, and fluorescence-based DNA quantification. Through these initial opportunities, and especially while working alongside Dr. Geist, I learned how to effectively prioritize tasks, maintain focus under pressure, and adapt to different research environments. Those initial exposures to academia/research not only strengthened my technical foundation but also taught me the importance of discipline, collaboration, and persistence in pursing long-term scientific goals.

During my time with Dr. Geist, I attended a seminar at the Harte Research Institute featuring Dr. Keisha Bahr, who presented her work titled “Coral Reefs in a Modern World: Assessing Impacts and Finding Solutions.” In her talk, Dr. Bahr discussed how her research evaluated coral health using a color card developed in her lab, focusing on the dominant coral species of Hawaii. At that point in my academic journey, I already knew I had a passion for marine biology, but her presentation profoundly expanded my perspective. I was captivated by the complexity, resilience, and beauty of coral reef ecosystems, and I knew I wanted to dedicate my life to studying them.

After my time in Dr. Geist’s lab ended, I began seeking opportunities to gain hands-on experience with marine life. During this transition, I applied to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department’s prestigious summer internship program at the Flower Bluff Hatchery, which specializes in raising redfish, trout, and flounder. I engaged in multiple interviews and eagerly awaited a response. Before hearing back, however, I decided to visit Corpus Christi’s local coral aquaculture and aquarium store facility. I walked in and asked to speak with the owner, Eli Alaniz, expressing my eagerness to learn everything I could about corals, even offering to work for free! To my surprise, Eli responded, “If you are willing to learn, then I am willing to teach.” Only days after this conversation, I was formally offered the sole position at the hatchery for the summer. I soon found myself facing one of the most difficult decisions of my academic career: should I accept this prestigious internship or pursue my passion for corals? Ultimately, after much deliberation, I made the decision to call the hatchery manager and decline her offer, despite the time and effort invested in the interview process. While the hatchery position was an incredible opportunity and one many of my colleagues would have jumped at, my growing fascination and obsession with coral reef research and my determination to pursue it compelled me to dedicate my time to learning from the coral aquaculture master himself, Eli Alaniz. That conversation with Eli lead to a year-long opportunity where I subsequently became the lead aquarist of his facility, maintaining eleven saltwater reef aquariums housing diverse finfish and invertebrate species. I developed custom feeding protocols, fragmented corals, and applied script-based statistical methods (R) to optimize day-to-day operations. This experience became one of the most formative of my career and taught me that as long as I knew what I wanted to do with my life that the universe would step aside.