

**ENS Elizabeth Bell  
Jr. COSTEP Summer 2014  
University of Georgia  
Lawton Service Unit  
Lawton, Oklahoma**

Driving into the unfamiliar town of Lawton, Oklahoma, where I was supposed to be stationed with the Indian Health Service's Office of Environmental Health, through the U.S. Public Health Service's Jr. Commissioned Officer Student Training and Extern Program, I didn't know what to expect. As I watched the face of Mount Scott of the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge creep up into view, and after some reassurance by the welcoming smile of the convenience store clerk, I concluded that the summer's experiences would surpass any preconceived expectations I had in my mind.



**Standing in front of a statue after surveying the Fort Sill Apache Youth Shelter and Senior Citizens Center**

Making it past the initial two days of training and getting to know the staff at the office, one of the earliest activities I was involved in was helping run rabies clinics. It was the job of my supervisors and I to fill out a legal verification slip for each vaccinated pet and ensure that their owners did not leave before receiving a slip, since there is no way to verify if the pet has received the shot without it. In all we completed nine four-hour clinics, with a total of 677 pets vaccinated throughout various different counties. Through the experience I learned how participating in such a simple way with limited use of resources could have a long-lasting impact to prevent the spread of a virus in the community, while also providing a service to pet owners.



**Another benefit of working at rabies clinics was meeting the little patients who came to receive their vaccinations**

During my first week at the internship, I was also taken for a visit to the Comanche Nation Water Park. I conducted my first survey in their cafe, which was preparing to open in the coming weeks. As with any new experience, I did not know what to expect but was talked through much of what we would be looking for by my supervisor Katie Tompkins. I quickly learned to take thorough notes on any violation we saw, ranging from improper storage of poultry to dirty ventilation hoods.

In all, I would go on to complete over 65 inspections with the guidance of my supervisors, in places not only limited to cafes and buffets but also casinos, senior citizens centers, daycares and head start programs, foster homes, hotels, gyms, and tribal dance grounds. We traveled extensively to these various locations, visiting seven different Indian tribes including Comanche, Caddo, Kiowa, Apache, Fort Sill Apache, Wichita, and Delaware. This meant I was to become very familiar with the FDA Food Code and NFPA Life Safety Codes, as well as other Standards. To help with the learning of codes, the web-based reporting system *WebEHRS* became a second language to me during times of frequent survey excursions. Conducting and reporting surveys brought me an invaluable amount of experience not only in learning how to go about noticing every hidden violation, but even more so in how to effectively work in collaboration with the managers and communicate in the most comprehensible way through the reporting system to improve the state of their facilities.

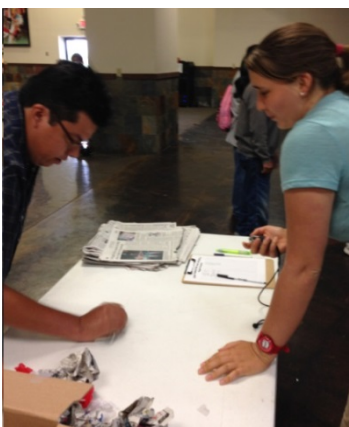
One of my main projects for the summer was visiting the Comanche Nation Water Park two to three times a week to test the four separate pool systems for chlorine levels and pH. I tested for Free and Total Chlorine to then measure the Combined Chlorine by subtracting the latter from the first. With this assigned task came several difficult conflicts right away. The park was facing the struggle of keeping chemical levels right while losing over 60,000 gallons of water every day from unidentified leaks along the pools' bases. While closing off the pools and reconstructing them was not a financial option to the owners, I attempted to create a well-meaning relationship with the pool managers to still create a safe pool environment with the best-achievable chemical levels despite much of it going to waste throughout the day. I was made aware that this was a problem that has been occurring for many years, and so with over four years of data from our water testing—including my entire three months' worth—we were able present it to the tribal leaders who have more authority in urging the pool owners to make changes. As of now the park has plans to completely renovate the pools at the end of this summer season.



**Checking for correct labeling of chemical containers during a survey at the Red River Casino**

Another aspect in which my qualifications were taken a step further was in getting the opportunity to teach Food Handler's Training classes to employees of food service facilities owned by Indian tribes. This included giving four presentations lasting nearly two-hours long and facilitating an exam. I was challenged to learn in even greater detail the specifics of food handling that we look for during our surveys of food service facilities. This included teaching about the proper receiving, storing, handling, and cooking of food as well as many other related topics such as personal hygiene, pest control, and proper sanitation and cleaning. In addition to Food Handler's Training, I also taught one class on Chemical Safety and one on protection from blood borne pathogens. This portion of my internship was likely the most rewarding experience of all. I was able to take what I learned from conducting surveys and teach employees on how the responsibility to follow Food Code standards and keep customers safe from harmful food borne illnesses lies in directly their hands.

Seeking out additional side-projects to keep busy when there was extra time, I took on a side-project my supervisor had been meaning to complete for some time to prepare alternative versions for the Food Handler's Training exams. These would be used to present the students with a greater variety of questions, especially since many of them attend trainings for renewal of their permits.



**Me facilitating a game at the Comanche Elder Safety Fair**

A final and very engaging opportunity I had was attending monthly Native Americans for Injury Prevention Coalition meetings. I had the chance to work at a various programs that the community health representatives organized, such as a car seat safety workshop where car seats were given to Indian families and installed for them, as well work at an Elder Safety Fair put on by the Comanche Nation, and a Cops for Kids Bike-A-Thon. The experience also granted me exposure into some of the Native American culture, which I found considerably broadened my experience of Lawton.

As my internship with the Indian Health Service comes to an end, in many ways I have come to realize my capacity to work in this field and it has steered me on the right track to continuing my career in Environmental Health upon graduation. As I wrap up my duties with the Jr. COSTEP program, I will head back home with a sense of pride and accomplishment for the duties I completed, much of which I owe to the entire OEH team for welcoming me into the group. I am confident that the unique and unforgettable experiences I had the privilege of being a part of this summer would have been difficult to find elsewhere.