

**2014 National Medal Winner: Mystic Aquarium
Justin Richard, Community Member Video**

I started volunteering at the aquarium because, at the time, my goal was to be a marine biology professor, and so what better way to get that experience than to help out with the education here at the aquarium. From there I became really interested in what they were doing with the marine mammals, so I started volunteering with the whales and dolphins—absolutely fell in love with it. I was able to do a couple of internships while I was in undergrad and had my foot firmly in the door by the time I graduated, and so I worked here as a Beluga whale trainer for a little over eight years, and during that time became really interested in Beluga whale research, and decided to pursue a graduate degree at the University of Rhode Island. As a Beluga whale trainer a huge part of my job was educating the public. I really enjoyed working with kids, especially. I had some opportunities to help out developing curriculums for Boys and Girls Clubs of America. I especially enjoyed working with students that visit from the Point Lay Community in northern Alaska when they visit Mystic Aquarium on an exchange program. Really, what I most enjoyed from an education standpoint at Mystic Aquarium was working with the college internship program. It's such a unique program compared to some of the other internships that are available and that there is real emphasis on career training. There is a lot of hands-on experience in our internship program. I'm a product of the internship program here. There was a lot of value in kind of paying that forward and being an intern mentor myself for many years and it's something that I really treasure. Currently, all of my PhD research is being conducted at the Mystic Aquarium and so I've had the unique opportunity to get access to the Beluga whales here and rely on the wonderful training and veterinary staffs to collaborate with my research. The value of conducting the research here at the aquarium is that we can build a solid scientific foundation that we can then apply to wild Beluga populations. This research would not exist without the support of the Mystic Aquarium. The unique talent of the staff here and the ability to train these animals to such a high degree, the wonderful facilities here really makes this research possible. Of course along with all the people who have served as mentors to me and who have helped me along in the research process and helped to give me these opportunities.