

Digging in the dirt isn't something you have to outgrow

by Holly HARVEY

Since he was a little boy, Collin College alum Nathan Van Vranken always had an interest in the past and exploring various museums and the outdoors. His childhood was filled with different explorations and studying dinosaurs.

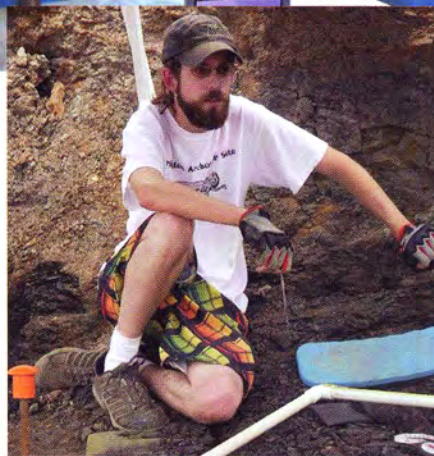
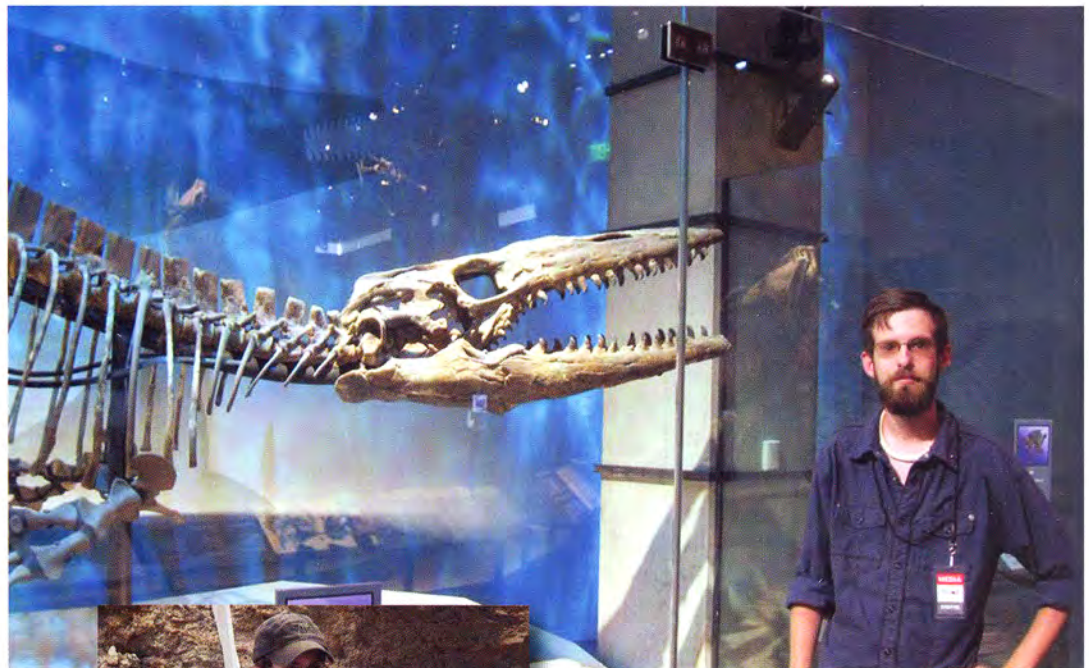
"The dinosaur craze most little kids have never really left me," Van Vranken said.

No longer a child staring in at awe at dinosaur skeletons, Van Vranken gets into the nitty-gritty details of fossils as he runs his own lab at the University of Texas of the Permian Basin analyzing and detailing fossil specimens.

"I've been involved with excavating the Arlington archosaur site and working at the UT Permian Basin mammoth site," Van Vranken explained. "I also do personal specimen collecting across the United States, and a lot of it is in the Dallas/Fort Worth and Big Bend areas."

The Arlington archosaur site is where more dinosaur fossils have been recovered than from any other site in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. The UT Permian Basin site serves as the focus of Van Vranken's current research in marine invertebrate layers.

Spending hours preparing and cleaning specimens comes after excavation and is necessary to learn



more about fossils. "In the lab, you use different types of solvents to remove some rock sediments from fossils, and you use different types of acids to break things down," Van Vranken explained. "Then, you use

small air-powered chisels and work inch by inch removing excess rocks. Once the specimen is cleaned up, you take measurements and describe it in detail."

But not everything that occurs in a fossil lab is exciting or ground-breaking. "A lot of the work is just general things such as prepping specimens, data entry, ordering supplies and looking over student projects," Van Vranken said.

But it wasn't until Collin College that Van Vranken decided to turn his dino-digging passion into a prosperous career.

"I came to Collin College because

the college offered the science classes I wanted, such as geology and biology,” Van Vranken said. “Collin College had a lot of science courses offered, and I knew I would need those classes to pursue paleontology.”

In addition to science courses, Collin College is home to the nationally-recognized Center for the Advanced Studies in Mathematics and Natural Sciences, a specialized program at Collin College for highly motivated and talented students majoring in mathematics or natural sciences. During his time at Collin College, Van Vranken became an active member in various professional, science-focused groups, such as the Geographical Society of America and the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology. Through his courses and memberships, he was able to get a foothold in academia.

“My first official research paper was published while I was at Collin College,” Van Vranken said. “I knew I needed to get my name out there and be known in my field and Collin College definitely helped with that.”

After graduating from Collin College with an associate’s degree, Van Vranken transferred to the University of Texas at Arlington where he received his bachelor’s degree. Currently, he is a graduate student and lecturer teaching historical geology at the University of Texas at Permian Basin. He is pursuing a graduate degree and wants to eventually work in a museum.

“The goal is to pursue a Ph.D. from there, work in a museum and specialize in a fossil collection,” Van Vranken said. “Right now, I’m working on ocean research from the Gulf of Mexico to Canada. Particularly, the creatures that swam in the cretaceous period called a mosasaurus—there’s so much still to be learned.”

For more information about academic programs at Collin College, visit www.collin.edu.

Holly Harvey is a public relations writer at Collin College.