

GATORS PAINTS & GOLDFISH

FOLLOWING THEIR PASSION

BY KENYA MCCULLUM, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

*Three stories of
radiologic science
professionals'
career paths*



Kevin Zimmer working at his previous job wrestling alligators.

All eyes were on Kevin Zimmer, R.T.(R), and the alligators as he selected a volunteer, a young boy, from the audience and brought him into the sand arena. The boy's job was simple: choose the alligator Kevin would wrestle.

Crouching into position, Kevin got to work. His snappy banter with the emcee and the audience ramped up the fun and emphasized the danger. It was all part of putting on a good show for the visitors, yet, his focus never strayed from his top goal: getting him and the alligator out of the arena safely and unharmed.

This was a typical work day for Kevin before he earned his credentials as a technologist. He's by no means the only ASRT member who pursued atypical career paths or used the lessons they learned in their odd jobs to benefit their work in the radiologic sciences.

Gator Wrestler R.T.

Kevin's three-and-a-half years as an alligator wrestler at Gatorland, a 110-acre theme park and wildlife preserve south of Orlando, Florida, began by happenstance. He was working as a waiter at Cracker Barrel when he served a customer wearing a Gatorland T-shirt. He chatted with her about how much he loved going to the park and seeing the alligator shows.

At the end of the meal, when he presented the check, the customer asked him whether he wanted to "flip hamburgers, or wrestle alligators."

"I told her I wanted to wrestle alligators, because who wouldn't?" Kevin said.

She offered him a job on the spot. Although he thought she was kidding, he said yes.

Six months later, he had memorized a script, done some introductory training, and was ready to wrestle, he said.

What does it take to wrestle an alligator? Kevin laughed at the question. "You have to be dumb. Be incredibly stupid and hardheaded — it's important," he joked. He added that there's an art to wrestling alligators that people outside the industry could never imagine.

"It's about understanding the animal and knowing what they're going to do next," he explained. "You know how to react to it, or if you

don't know how to react to it, they teach you how to safely be on an alligator."

There's a place on an alligator's back that's safe from attack, he explained. From there, it's possible to grab the animal's jaws and put it in a submission hold that's easy to maintain.

After learning the technique, "your natural movement or your muscle memory takes you right back to that safe spot, and you're less likely to get hurt," he said. "If you know what you can do with an alligator, what annoys them and what doesn't annoy them, you can get through a show without getting hurt. You kind of understand them and they kind of understand you."

OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS

But even with this understanding, accidents can happen. Early in the job, he had a close call when a gator snapped at him. That encounter almost cost him a kneecap, he said, but the only victim of the encounter was his pants, which were shredded.

That was when he truly understood the danger, and had to ask himself whether the thrill of wrestling gators for a living was worth the potential for injury. The answer was yes, so he dedicated himself to learning as much as possible and becoming the best alligator wrestler he could be.

Kevin escaped his years of gator wrestling without any major injuries, but his mentor wasn't as lucky. An alligator bit him in the face, and the bite required plastic surgery to minimize the puncture wounds.

People who wrestle alligators for a living know the risks, Kevin said. "Any time you mess around with alligators, it's always your fault if you get hurt," he said. "The animal's just being an animal."

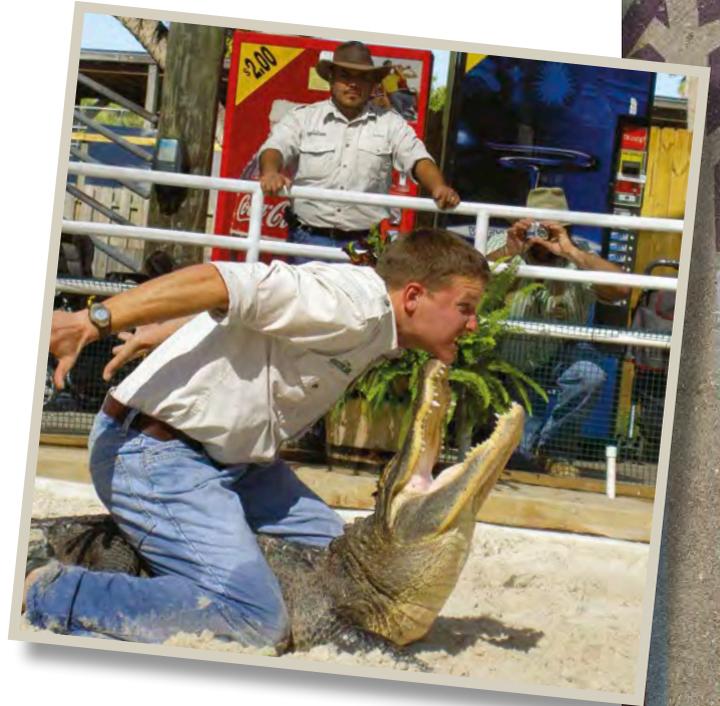
The job wasn't just about danger, though, Kevin said. His favorite part was entertaining families and teaching children about the reptiles that he came to love. Gatorland buys and rehabilitates alligators that would otherwise be killed, and it has a conservation program to protect alligators and crocodiles in Florida and support conservation research.

ALLIGATOR POSITIONING

The reptiles all had different personalities, which added to the thrill of the cat and mouse game of wrestling them, Kevin said.

"When you're on an alligator's back, you're feeling their movements, you know when they're breathing really hard. ... [That tells you] they're getting ready to do something," Kevin said. "The alligator is also feeling your movements, so if you're talking to the crowd and your hand starts loosening a little bit around his mouth, he knows, 'oh, this is my chance.' You're kind of sizing each other up the whole time."

Kevin moved on to work in solar energy for several years before joining the radiography program at Polk State College in Lakeland, Florida.



Today, he sizes up patients for radiographs as an R.T. He said he enjoys the change of pace and is even able to use some of the skills he gained at Gatorland. And no, it's not wrestling patients into position.

Part of his gator-wrestling job was to take photos with visitors after the show. Helping them to get that special memento to take home required Kevin to get into the same position repeatedly — usually holding a gator or a snake. Getting audience members their perfect shot is surprisingly similar to working a full docket of patients and getting each one into an optimal position for a perfect scan.

He said being an R.T. is a physically easier and more rewarding career.

"I really enjoy it," he said. "It's not as hard on the body as wrestling alligators, and you get to help improve people's lives."



IMAGES: Kevin Zimmer



**“Image With Intent”
by Lizzy Rainey**

Creating a Landscape

Lizzy Rainey, R.T.(R), had been painting for many years, but it wasn't until 2004, after her mother died, that her creativity kicked into overdrive. The 40-year veteran R.T. said that putting paint on canvas became a fundamental part of her healing process.

“I just never stopped,” she said. “Whether I'm painting a child's portrait or adding x-ray images into an autumn scene, it's very healing for me. ... Art is something I need in my life.”

Lizzy started painting radiographs after an exhausting evening shift. At about midnight, she set up her canvas and couldn't stop thinking about one of the examinations she'd performed on a patient's wrist; in particular, the carpal bones.

“On my canvas, I saw a little river stone shining in the sunlight, and that's the first one I did,” she said.

“Carpal River Stones” is one piece in a series called Landscape Anatomy that also includes “Shoulder Boulder,” “Cardiac Roots” and “Sunrise Patella.”

The images have been published in the ASRT journal, *Radiologic Technology*, and displayed in hospitals, clinics and doctors' offices around the country as well as the Indiana Statehouse, the Tippecanoe Art Federation, the radiology department of the Pentagon and the Opera House Gallery of Contemporary Art.

To create the paintings, Lizzy projects anonymized images onto the canvas to sketch them. That way, the body parts are identifiable to health care professionals, she said. She likes taking these clinical images, which can sometimes be frightening to patients, and turning them into something beautiful and peaceful.

Last year, she created a series of portraits of co-workers to honor their experiences on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, Lizzy has been selected five times to be part of the Hoosier Women Artists program, which honors talented female artists in Indiana.

Lately, Lizzy has focused on commissioned autumn scenes, particularly with trick-or-treaters. Although she's done plenty of Halloween-themed work, she avoids artwork that's on the scary side and has turned down requests for subjects like the legendary Jersey Devil — a character from Southern New Jersey and Philadelphia folklore.

“I try to keep my art uplifting, happy and hopeful,” Lizzy said.

You can find her work at auntlizzy.com.



“One Autumn” by Lizzy Rainey

IMAGES: Lizzy Rainey

A Different Animal



As an R.T. at a veterinary clinic, Ashley Pick, M.H.A., R.T.(R), performed scans on household pets and zoo animals. During that time, she saw some strange things in the clinic. One of the strangest was a horse with a pole in its head. Its owners said they'd found the animal that way and had no idea how it happened. After the pole was removed, Ashley and her colleagues performed a computed tomography exam on the animal.

"The pole missed every vital part of the head," Ashley said. "It was really fascinating to see."

Ashley loved the variety the job offered. She saw cases involving ultrasound images of a goldfish's tumor and radiation therapy to treat a pet rat.

She added that positioning an animal for a procedure could be challenging.

"You can't tell an animal just to hold a certain way. You have to figure out how to get the shot you need by moving the equipment or rotating them a certain way using sponges or all kinds of different things," Ashley said. "You really have to think outside the box."

Also, if the animal is frightened, it might react badly to being handled. Ashley was bitten by cats and dogs and sustained other injuries from other animals.

"Accidents happen," she said, "The animals aren't with their owner and they get scared and freaked out."

Ashley made a shift in her career after earning a master's degree in health care administration. She now works at a health clinic, where she serves as associate director for clinical services. She oversees the lab, radiology, physical therapy and pharmacy departments. Many of the lessons she learned during her time working with animals have stayed with her. In particular, working with animal patients who are unable to verbalize their discomfort helped her recognize the signs that a human patient isn't happy about something that is being done during an exam.

"You expect people to tell you that they're uncomfortable or they don't understand something," she said, but sometimes they don't. "So watching your patient's reactions is important."



These three ASRT members are but a few examples of the many R.T.s who followed their passions into off-the-beaten-path activities and took what they learned from those experiences into the medical imaging and radiation therapy profession. From performing imaging exams on a fish and painting a radiograph to wrestling an alligator, these experiences show that there's no one path to professional fulfillment. S