

DATA VERSIFY

Calvin Belton

Researcher Background:

Calvin Belton (he/him) is a PhD student at the University of Kansas. He studies Lepidoptera (butterflies and moths) and *Drosophila* (fruit flies). He is currently in Jamie Walters' lab, which looks at sex-specific longevity differences. Calvin investigates the genetic causes of these differences, focusing on the role of sex chromosomes.

Q: How would you describe your science to a 5th grader?

A: I see whether males or females live longer in different types of insects (moths, butterflies, fruit flies) and try to figure out how their DNA plays a role.

Q: Why did you become a biologist?

A: I first began my education in Public Health and was drawn to diseases spread by insects. When COVID-19 happened, it gave me the opportunity to work professionally in public health, and I realized I wasn't suited for it. So, I changed tactics. I started working in a lab that worked with the genetics of plants, and then I worked at an insect museum. I found I really enjoyed doing these things instead.



Calvin catching butterflies.

Q: What is your favorite part about your job?

A: I enjoy how varied my work is. I do research for a few hours, then I'll work with my animals in the lab, and then proceed to code for a while. I get to think about the work I do, and I have a lot of flexibility in that.

Q: Do you have any aspects of your identity that you feel are underrepresented, marginalized, or minoritized in STEM or society?

A: I am transgender, queer, and neurodivergent. Socioeconomically, I grew up around the poverty line.

Q: What obstacles have you overcome to get where you are?

A: Related to my neurodivergence, I don't learn in the typical way. I typically need to learn a concept multiple different ways to grasp it fully, and my brain takes time to process information. Finding how I can best process information has been a continuous

experiment. While this can be difficult at times, it also means that once I do grasp a concept, I possess a deeper knowledge than a person typically would. Additionally, when I am interested in a topic, my brain will focus on it fully, making research an exhilarating process.

Q: What are hobbies and/or interests that you have outside of your research?

A: I enjoy going on hikes, making art, and performing during my spare time (in plays).

Q: What is your favorite thing about performing in plays?

A: I really enjoy performance because it is so separate from science; it gives my mind a break from that intense focus. I've found that doing something completely unrelated actually helps me return to my research with better clarity and energy.

Q: How did you get into performance arts?

A: When I first moved to Kansas, I didn't know anyone and was in a strange transitional period of my life. I was working in a lab, but wasn't doing much else, so I went out to a queer open mic one night. It was really lovely, there's a fantastic community here. And at the end of it, someone mentioned a theatre troupe was having auditions. I never got to do theatre before, I was always too busy at school, so I decided, why not? I didn't think I was going to get in or anything; it was just something to do. But I did get in, somehow. And I just kept going from there.

Q: What advice do you have for aspiring biologists?

A: It's never too early to start work in biology. There are programs at museums, there are local groups interested in specific sciences (herpetology, mycology, ornithology, etc), and there are non-profits that work with biology, like Monarch Watch. I recommend you foster your interest in biology by getting involved with groups like this.

Q: What do you believe are key elements to being successful in biology?

A: Working in biology, especially research, means a continual interest and curiosity towards the concepts related to it. Something else important is attention to detail and specifics. When conducting an original experiment or replicating others, there are a number of factors that can influence your results. Documentation and being specific are essential in running a good experiment.

