

Walter "TJ" Heiniger IV

Employee Spotlight

Title: Scientist III
Employee Since: 2010

We are celebrating 40 years of personalized service and improving animal health. This milestone could not have been reached without the hard work of our extraordinary team of scientists and support personnel. We are putting the spotlight on various members of our team throughout our celebration of this 40-year milestone.

What made you apply at VMRD?

I was working at a temporary job and was only allowed to work a set number of hours. My temporary status was also running out. One of my coworkers at the temporary job knew I grew up on a farm and told me the company that his wife works at was looking for someone with a science background and had animal handling experience. This sounded like a perfect fit with my Animal Science background and life experiences growing up on the farm, so I applied to VMRD.

Do you remember your first day?

I remember being nervous walking in the door. The first people I met with was Scott B. and Angie. They handed me a pair of coveralls and rubber boots and said, "We're going to do animal care." The three of us piled into VMRD's single cab pick-up and headed out to the farm. Of course, being the new guy, I got to sit in the middle. The farm was around 30 minutes away but being crammed into a bench seat of a single cab pick-up was great way to meet your new coworkers. We pulled up to the farm, walked into the barn, and over to the pens with hogs in them. We were collecting blood samples from the pigs to produce an anti-serum in production. Growing up on a farm I knew that pigs do not like to be handled. I knew this was going to be interesting. The three of us went into the pen and they said we need to restrain the pig so we could collect a sample from it. Scott and I wrestled this 250 lbs pig, properly restraining it while Angie collected a sample tube of blood. We sampled five more pigs after this. Once we completed our animal work, we all piled into the pick-up while smelling like pigs. When we got back to VMRD, we got cleaned up and processed the blood. After the day had ended, I thought to myself, that was a fun, interesting day and could not wait to see what tomorrow brought.



What is your role and background? How has your job changed over the years?

I graduated from the University of Idaho where I studied Animal Science, but my real-life experience was growing up on a ranch. This is what prepared me for the job that I was originally hired for. On our family's farm, I grew up with all different kinds of animals and learned how to properly handle them. My animal care experience and my education are why I was hired for VMRD's Animal care/Production Scientist position. My time at VMRD has evolved from working on the farm, to in the lab and managing equipment. Through all my experiences, my role has changed from an Animal Care specialist to a Production Scientist III. Working as a Scientist, I have become the senior member of the production lab and have gained the wisdom and knowledge of becoming an incredible "Scientist".

If you could switch your job with anyone else within VMRD, whose job would you want?

I think that I would want to switch to the shipping department. This is partly because of its location, but ultimately I would love to have the privilege of greeting all the smiling faces of VMRD's amazing employees each day.

What has been your biggest achievement/success?

Coming into my position, I knew very little about science, so much that I had to be trained on how to properly operate a pipette. Through great training and years of experience I have worked hard on becoming Senior Scientist. This has included not just how to make ELISA, AGID and FA products, but the science of how they work and how to trouble-shoot them when they do not. I personally feel, I have become one of more knowledgeable scientists on how to trouble-shoot and how to aid in the technical transfer of new products to the production department.

What has been your biggest "lesson learned"?

My manager assigned Amanda B. and me the task of making blood smears. We were very new and did not have much experience in making slides. We finally were able to figure out the process of how to make a blood smear with a proper feather pattern. Once we made the slides, we ran our fluorescent assay (IFA) on them. We requested Ethan be the official reader. When reading the slides, he was having difficulty interpreting the slide, so he asked Dr. Adams for help. Dr. Adams was looking through the microscope asked how Amanda and I fixed the slide. We both looked at each other and said, "we're supposed to fix them?". Dr. Adams stood up and walked out of the room without saying a word. We were so embarrassed that we did not know the correct process, BUT I will always remember that we must fix slides before running IFA.

What advice would you give to new hires?

Mistakes happen, be honest and learn from them.

What is your favorite part of your job? What excites you the most?

My favorite part of the job is collaborating with the Research Department to transfer new products to Production. Figuring out the process of upscaling the manufacturing, while applying the standards of the production process is very enjoyable to me. I also appreciate validating the assay by making pre-licensing serial to submit data for approval from the USDA. Seeing the process go from the initial startup, to scale up, and making our first kit is a highlight of my job.

What is your favorite VMRD memory?

We had a company picnic at Wawawai park. At the picnic, we all got to hang out, share a meal and play games. Angie and I were lab mates and had become good friends. This friendship evolved to playing jokes on each other. At the picnic, I was unaware that she snuck up behind me and dumped ice down my shirt. To retaliate, I picked her up and placed her into a canoe that was on the bank of the river. I then pushed the canoe, with her in it, into the water without an oar. It turns out that this nice wooden canoe, did not belong to someone at VMRD, but to a stranger. Angie was now floating out in the water in a stranger's canoe with no way to get back to shore. They were not too happy, but were very understanding. To this day, Angie has never put ice down my shirt again and we still laugh about her being stuck in someone else's canoe.

How would you describe the company culture?

I really believe that the company wants to make every employee's life better. Morale and team building is important for all of us to have a harmonious work environment. People are friendly, outgoing, and genuinely caring. We all work as a team and people go out of their way to help one another.

What do you hope to see for VMRD in the future?

I am enthusiastic for the future of VMRD as we are bringing new products to the market and new manufacturing processes. I am excited that I will be a critical contributor in the development of new products for the success of VMRD.