Undergraduate Spotlight: Madelene Clark

As a transfer student coming into UF, Madelene Clark had her academic plan pretty well mapped out. She already earned her A.A. degree in biology from Santa Fe College. In fact, Madelene is enrolled in the Soil and Water Sciences Department's Combined B.S./M.S. Degree Program. She is on track to complete her undergraduate degree this semester and hopes to fully enter her graduate degree work in spring 2021. In 2019, she was the recipient of the Soil and Water Sciences Department's Frederick B. Smith Scholarship.

Madelene Clark (Photo by Mackenzie Goode)

Myakka: Why did you choose Soil and Water Sciences as a major?

Madelene Clark: I have a strong passion for microbiology and the environment. Soil and Water Sciences allowed me to combine these interests. It connects the micro scale to the landscape. I really love how you can physically touch and see how in class concepts affect the world around us.

Myakka: Do you have a favorite class or experience during your time in the department?

MC: I greatly enjoyed Dr. Allan Bacon's Environmental Pedology class. It further shaped my understanding of soils as a means to tell a story and how to better communicate scientific findings.

Recording soil pit observations during Dr. Bacon's Environmental Pedology class. (Photo by Allan Bacon)

Soil sampling a fallow field in Nanyuki, Kenya. (Photo by Mackenzie Goode)

Myakka: What extracurricular activities have you been able to participate in at UF?

MC: I went to Kenya for an internship and study abroad experience my junior year. This was a great opportunity because it changed my perspective on agriculture and the impact of soil quality and nutrition. I knew soil only from a scientific standpoint. Until this experience, I couldn't visualize how it affected lives and it opened my eyes as to how necessary soil scientists are in the future of agriculture and environmental issues.

Myakka: Have you had any research experiences in addition to the work in Kenya?

MC: I've had more research and work experience on campus than I can count, but my most significant experience was I working in Dr. Gabriel Maltais-Landry's Soil Fertility Lab. Partnering with Field and Fork Gardens, I was able to get my feet wet in soil research and data analysis. It was a foundational opportunity which helped me grow as a student and future researcher.

Myakka: What are your career plans after graduating from UF?

MC: After graduate school, I hope to go into academic research. I'm interested in extreme environments and how life interacts in soil systems.

Myakka: What would you like others to know about Soil and Water Sciences?

MC: If you're interested in how the natural world works, Soil and Water Sciences is one of the best ways to understand it. As I reflect on my time at UF, I know that without the

A soil profile from created during a field visit during Dr. Bacon's Environmental Pedology class. (Photo by Madelene Clark)

faculty and staff of the SWS department I would not be even half as successful as I am today. It’s a great community and support system that goes beyond academics.

There are several undergraduate work, scholarship, and internship experiences I would not have had if I didn’t major in SWS. The department caters to experiential learning on top of classroom settings. Undergraduates are set up for success with a variety of interdisciplinary opportunities.

Everyone has a bit of them that wants to save the world, but with soil science you can actually achieve it. Soil science isn't the flashiest thing, but I believe that soil makes a huge impact on our quality of life now and in the future. Whether it is feeding the world, climate change, water quality, or wetland remediation, soil is going to make a difference. It's the most exciting thing because you get to immerse yourself in nature as you train and work to solve some of the world's biggest problems.