

## First Person Singular

# Animal house

**TJ Fisher, 18, Potomac // Summer carousel staffer, Glen Echo Park**

**INTERVIEW BY ANN COCHRAN**

**Getting to work** at a place like this gives me the opportunity to experience it quite intimately. I've found comics from World War II glued to the inner wall of the machinery room at the carousel's center. We clean the animals with baby wipes to protect the paint, and I can almost feel in my hands the tools skilled craftsmen used to carve these beauties. I choose a long-past dance-craze tune for the band organ and think about how people — from all the different decades of the park's history, and now — hear the music.

Nannies bring children here, but mostly it's parents and grandparents. They want to make this memory themselves. I get that. I grew up nearby,



PHOTOGRAPH BY ASTRID RECKEN



and my parents brought me here often. When I'm a father, I'm sure I'll do the same. Many adults come without children, too. I love hearing the stories of people who visited the old amusement park years ago and came back to the area, never dreaming that the carousel would still be around. A few weeks ago, we had a lady of 106 who wept beautifully all the way through her ride. One night a few weeks after that, we fit a gorgeous wedding party onto the platform, more people than I've ever seen in and around the animals at one time.

It runs on its original 1921 motor. Today, most carousels use speakers. We're lucky to have a Wurlitzer band organ from 1926. It's one of only three left still playing in public, the only one still in its original location. We have 238 rolls of music issued from 1914 to this year. I've learned how to create new music on the paper rolls. Each song takes about 15 hours, from piano to computer to punching holes in the paper rolls. I'm mostly self-taught. It helps to have a musical background. I've played violin and piano, and at college I sing in a choral ensemble.

I've gotten stains from the grease that keeps the carousel's gears running smoothly, puzzled over mysterious problems with the band organ until it played again, and felt like a broiling scallop in the heat of the building, but it's all easy work. Although I was hired to operate and maintain the carousel, I mainly think of myself as an entertainer, making sure everyone has fun. People want to take pictures, and I don't rush anyone. When a kid shakes a carousel animal, I just say, "You know, that ostrich just had an operation, so please be gentle." That always works.