

Animal



Ambassadors

A child's first visit to the Zoo usually reverberates with new and thrilling sights and sounds—the giraffe's majestic walk, a polar bear's plunge into a pool, a gorilla thumping its chest, a lion's roar, a peacock strutting across a path.

It's an experience that every child deserves, but one that is not easily accessible to many children and their families. The Zoological Society is working with several Milwaukee-area teachers and community leaders to change that.

Through its Animal Ambassador educational outreach program, now in its third year, the Society unites children from schools primarily serving low-income families with sponsors who, through private funding, give hundreds of children a chance to discover the rich rewards of a trip to the Zoo each year.

Among the children who got that chance this year were fifth-graders from Milwaukee's Elm Creative Arts School. Marquette Electronics Foundation, Elm School's business partner since 1986, is sponsoring the school's participation in the Ambassador Program.

Earlier this year, the students gathered at the school for a presentation by Chuck Matoush, a Zoological Society education program coordinator, on animals at the Zoo, the importance of saving animals and their natural habitats, how animals adapt to their environment, how kids can become "good stewards" of the earth, and why zoos of today resemble modern arks.

To reinforce the zoo-as-ark concept and to help recruit the students as true "animal ambassadors," Mary Fitzgerald, Jim Burk and Dena Wegehaupt, all fifth-grade

teachers, asked their students to pick a favorite animal, sent them to the library to research it, and then treated the students to their first of two Zoo visits.


"When we got to the Zoo, I was astounded by what the children learned from their research," Fitzgerald said. "They were telling me about the animals' habitats, eating habits, adaptations, things that they wouldn't probably have learned as thoroughly as part of the school's regular curriculum."

During the course of the second semester, Matoush made one more visit to the school, teaching the students about geography and ecology and introducing them to animal-related careers and what kinds of skills it takes to work in those careers. And, the students made one more visit to the Zoo, which emphasized the geographic and ecological concepts presented in class and gave the children a chance to meet some of the Zoo and Zoological Society staff. "The children also toured Marquette Electronics, where they were exposed to another whole set of real-world work opportunities," Fitzgerald said.

"Without Marquette Electronics Foundation's sponsorship, we could never give the children all these opportunities," Fitzgerald said. "One of the nicest things about the foundation's support is that it allows the children to bring their families out to the Zoo and share what they've learned through the program with them." Fitzgerald said. As part of the program, each student received four Zoo passes and parking to make a visit to the Zoo possible. "This is what makes the kids real ambassadors."

To thank Marquette Electronics Foundation for its support, the students stitched a wall panel of embroidered animals for Jerry Reiser, chairman of the foundation and coordinator of the foundation's involvement in the Ambassador Program.

"The program ties in well with the foundation's mission to support the arts and education," Reiser said. "This program involves both. It gives so many children a chance to use their creative spirit to enhance the learning process. There is no better way to teach."

"Just seeing the kids at the Zoo, listening to them talk about the animals, being excited about learning...that is the program's, the foundation's and Milwaukee's biggest reward." 

The following sponsors made participation in the Animal Ambassador Program possible for 10 Milwaukee-area schools this year: Badger Meter (Urban Day); Beatrice Cheese (Whittier Elementary); Cleaver Family Foundation (27th Street); Friends of Bill Messinger (38th Street); Marquette Electronics Foundation (Elm Creative Arts); Miller Brewing Co. (37th Street); Robin Squier (Garden Homes Elementary); Warner Cable Communications (LaFollette Elementary); the Zoological Society's Associate Board (White Rock Elementary); and the Zoological Society (Hawley Environmental). Robin Squier, one of this year's sponsors, led a class through the Ambassador Program last year as a teacher at 27th Street School. A strong advocate of the program, Squier also has recruited new Ambassador Program sponsors.



ON THE JOB

Chuck Matoush
Education Program Coordinator
Zoological Society

An uninhibited free spirit, Chuck Matoush came to the Zoological Society with classroom experiences like few educators will ever know. For starters, Matoush spent nine years in Alaska—two years in an Indian Village north of the Arctic Circle teaching science and math, and seven years in three different Eskimo villages near the Bering Sea teaching biology, ecology, conservation and physical science to children who didn't speak English.

Stints of work with the Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, and Youth and Young Adult Conservation Corps also show Matoush's passion for wildlife conservation.

With a degree in elementary education and conservation of natural resources, Matoush never thought about working at a Zoo—until last year, that is. "My interest in wildlife and biology goes way back to when I was living with my family near St. Paul's Como Park," he said. "During those first few Zoo visits is when I started to really get interested in animals."

Matoush said his unique collection of life's experiences have given him a different perspective on people and help him better respond to needs of the diverse student populations participating in the Zoological Society's school programs.

Chuck Matoush helps a group of fifth-graders from Elm Creative Arts School make a food chain as part of the Animal Ambassador Program.