

It's graduation day at the Milwaukee County Zoo. Parents are beaming. Teachers look proud. Cameras are flashing. The graduates, all fourth and fifth graders, are leafing through animal picture books and chatting about favorite Zoo critters. These pint-sized conservationists have just graduated from the Zoological Society's Animal Ambassador program. In 2009, this program celebrates its 20th anniversary of bringing the world of animals to metro-Milwaukee schools in urban neighborhoods.

Launched in 1989, Animal Ambassador is the Zoological Society of Milwaukee's (ZSM's) longest-running education program. The ZSM wanted to connect elementary school children (most in fourth and fifth grades) attending schools in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods to the Zoo, says Mary Thiry, who was the ZSM's director of education when the program launched. Animal Ambassador proved popular with teachers

because it engaged kids for an entire semester, she explains. For many kids, this was their first chance to visit the Zoo.

Here's how the program works: First, teachers get special training from ZSM educators. School classes then come to the Zoo for a hands-on lesson about animal adaptations. In turn, a ZSM instructor visits each school to present an animal program, complete with a live animal such as a snake or a box turtle that kids can touch. Classes come back to the Zoo in early spring for a tour and program on endangered species. In May, they take a third trip to the Zoo for a formal graduation ceremony. Here, they're rewarded with animal-themed picture books and free Zoo passes so they can return with their families in the summer. (In 2001, Animal Ambassador expanded to reach second and third grades in several schools. The younger classes each come to the Zoo once in the fall and continue the program in the fourth grade.)

# 20 Years of Animal Ambassadors

Education



◀ Fourth-grader James Edwards shakes hands with U.S. Cellular® representative Kathy Hust at an Animal Ambassador graduation on May 28, 2009, at the Zoo. U.S. Cellular sponsors James' school, Barton Elementary in Milwaukee.

▼ Four boys from Barton Elementary School look at animal picture books during last May's graduation. From left are Sean Stephan, Dustin Rathell, James Edwards and Nequon Ivory.

Each of the Animal Ambassador schools has a Milwaukee-based sponsor such as a company, a foundation or an individual, who make it all possible. The idea is that sponsors can hang out with the kids, says Thiry. Sponsors are encouraged to visit schools and meet up with classes during Zoo trips. Kids create sponsor thank-you gifts such as quilts or animal-themed scrapbooks at the end of the program.

Karen Peck Katz, immediate past chair of the ZSM's Board of Directors, has sponsored a school since the program's beginning, first with the ZSM's Associate Board and then through her family's foundation, Peck Foundation, Milwaukee LTD. Every year, she encourages kids at her school to "pay her back" by inspiring friends and families to help save animals and the environment. "I love how the kids are so inquisitive," says Katz. "This is a great introduction and eye-opener for what is outside of their immediate world."

Thanks to financial support from sponsors such as Katz, the program grew from 7 schools in 1989 to 21 schools in the 2008-'09 school year, says James Mills, the ZSM's current director of education. Since 1989, about 25,000 students have gone through the program. If you estimate that each student spread the message of animal conservation to just three friends or family members, the number of people (including the students) reached by the program in the last 20 years climbs to about 100,000!

In the program's early years, Ambassador classes at the Zoo were taught in trailers and a small education complex in the Zoo's farm. Today, Ambassador groups enjoy the interactive Animal Adaptations Lab in the ZSM's state-of-the-art Karen Peck Katz Conservation Education Center at the Zoo. "Kids love touching the animal artifacts, computers and microscopes, things they might not have at home," notes Amy Mertins, who teaches the program at Fletcher Elementary, 9520 W. Allyn St. in Milwaukee. Interacting with animal experts is another treat for the students. Just ask them about ZSM educator Julie Pickard, who has managed the program for the last 10 years. "The students are always quite amazed

with her vast knowledge and barely allow her to leave the room without someone asking just one more important question," says Julene Flanagan, a teacher at Milwaukee's Story Elementary School, 3815 W. Kilbourn Ave., which has been an Animal Ambassador school since the early 1990s. (Whittier School in Waukesha and Milwaukee's Hawley Environmental School have also been in the program since 1992.)



(1) 2009: Sean Stephan from Barton Elementary takes a picture of a polar bear in March during his second Animal Ambassador trip to the Zoo. Students take photos for an annual Animal Ambassador newsletter called *Kids to Kids*. See Sean graduate (page 8).



(2) 2006: Deja Reese from Hawthorne Elementary School completes an activity sheet about animal skeletons in the ZSM's Animal Adaptations Lab. (3) 2003: Amy Sanquist works through a computer program on animals during an Animal Ambassador trip to the Zoo.



Kids who've gone through the program take the initiative to learn about the animals and careers in science, adds Flanagan. They check out animal books from the school library and look up information online. In recent years, the program has included brief tests given before students start the program and after they finish it to evaluate learning. (Ambassador curriculum matches science guidelines for Milwaukee Public Schools and the state of Wisconsin.) More than 80% of the students show growth in knowledge after completing the program, says ZSM education director James Mills.

The program also helps kids grow and develop as individuals. For example, it works to counter fears and misconceptions that some urban children have about wild animals. Students



are often afraid of being attacked by animals, says Mills. So children learn that people must treat animals with a healthy respect; that wild animals shouldn't be threatened or cornered. In fact, kids who've gone through the program treat each other, not just animals, with a bit more kindness. "It makes students a little bit more caring, a little bit more empathetic," says Fletcher School teacher Amy Mertins. Kiam, a fourth-grade student from Milwaukee's Barton Elementary, had this to say after completing the program in 2009: "I would like to tell other students to take care of our Earth so we can have a great environment."

It also helps kids celebrate their accomplishments. When Mertins' class was graduating from the program last May, a TV news team from Channel 6 showed up to cover the ceremony for that night's newscast. "The kids were excited that people wanted to see what they were doing," says Mertins. Thanks to dedicated educators, sponsors and the ZSM, the Animal Ambassador program could put generations of young animal lovers in the spotlight for the next 20 years.

*By Julia Kolker*



(1) 2006: ZSM educator Julie Pickard has managed the Animal Ambassador program for a decade. Here, she presents a T-shirt to a student. (2) 2004: A Time Warner Cable representative and ZSM educator Julie Pickard hold a colorful banner that students created as a sponsor gift. Time Warner Cable sponsored Milwaukee's Carson Elementary school.

"I would like to tell other students to take care of our Earth so we can have a great environment."

-Kiam



(3) 2000: A student holds a snake that a ZSM educator brought to Milwaukee's Pershing Elementary School. (4) 1994: Zoo Pride volunteer Gladys Harvey gives a Zoo tour to Ambassador students. (5) 1999: ZSM educator James Edwards brought a live snake to school for Ambassador students.

### IMAGES OF SUCCESS: [zoosociety.org/ambassador](http://zoosociety.org/ambassador)

What did Animal Ambassador programs look like in the last two decades? See an archive of Animal Ambassador photos online at [www.zoosociety.org/ambassador](http://www.zoosociety.org/ambassador). This site also features past *Alive* stories on the program and comments from Animal Ambassador kids over the years. If you're a Time Warner Cable subscriber, you can watch a video of the 2009 Animal Ambassador graduations on Channel 1111 (click the Milwaukee County Zoo "super category"). If your company or organization would like information about how to sponsor a school, please call Cassie Jeffery at (414) 258-2333. Schools join the program through invitation; for more information, please call the ZSM's education office at (414) 258-5058.

### 2008-2009 ANIMAL AMBASSADOR SCHOOLS AND SPONSORS:

SCHOOL	SPONSOR
Prince of Peace	Anonymous Family Foundation
La Causa Charter School	Antonia Foundation
Neeskara Elementary School	Arnow & Associates
Westside Academy II	Charles D. Jacobus Family Foundation
Whittier Elementary School	Cooper Power Systems
Clemens Elementary School	Jerome and Dorothy Holz Family Foundation
Kuge Elementary School	Jerome and Dorothy Holz Family Foundation
Story School	Joy Global Foundation, Inc.
Green Bay Avenue Elementary School	Weyco Group Charitable Trust
Carson Academy of Science	Macy's
Hawley Environmental School	Peck Foundation, Milwaukee LTD.
Rawson Elementary School	PPG Industries Foundation
Barton Elementary School	U.S. Cellular®
Browning Elementary School	U.S. Cellular®
Fletcher Elementary School	Wells Fargo
Hayes Bilingual School	Wells Fargo
River Trail Elementary School	Zoological Society Associate Board
A. E. Burdick School	Zoological Society of Milwaukee
Alcott Elementary School	Zoological Society of Milwaukee
Twenty-First Street Elementary School	Zoological Society of Milwaukee