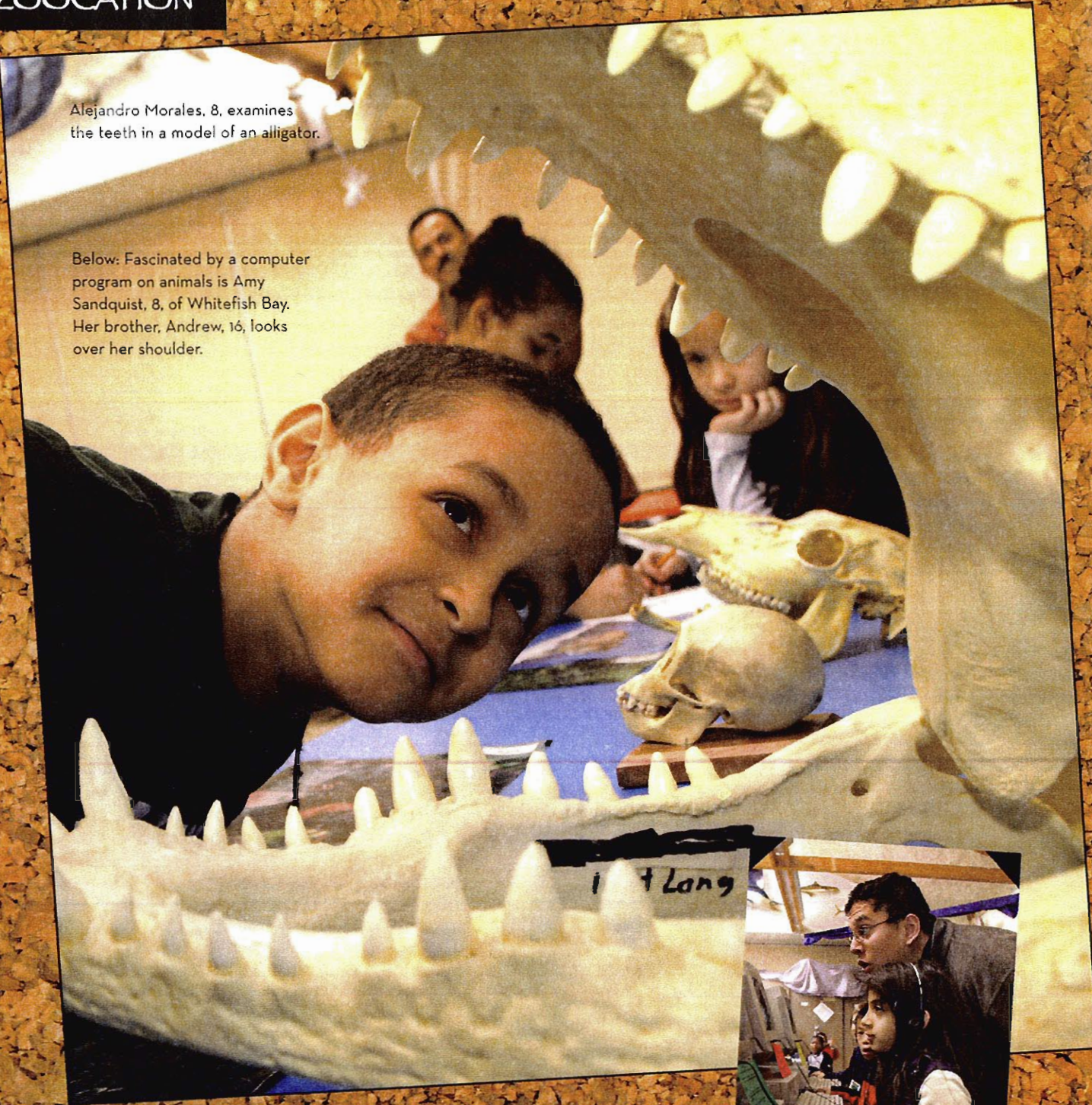


Alejandro Morales, 8, examines the teeth in a model of an alligator.

Below: Fascinated by a computer program on animals is Amy Sandquist, 8, of Whitefish Bay. Her brother, Andrew, 16, looks over her shoulder.



Junior Ambassadors

# Reaching into Schools

A 10-year-old boy holds a cardboard cutout of a sun in front of his third-grade class. Today he has the important job of representing the primary source of energy for all life in the food chain. For the second step in the food chain, a student holds up a sign for grass. Each student has to answer a question before being able to represent part of the food chain, and soon everyone is part of a growing chain. Next, the instructor hands "the sun" a ball of yarn. He holds onto one end as it gets passed around, creating a web of yarn. Each child represents an animal that can eat the preceding "animal or plant" along the yarn. The visual demonstration is a fun way to show children the food-chain process and the relationship each animal and plant has with the rest of the food web.

Learning about food-chain dynamics is a key part of the Zoological Society's Animal Ambassador program. This year we celebrate the 15th anniversary of this education program that teaches elementary school students about animal science and conservation. Since 1989, the program has reached 900 to 1,200 Milwaukee-area children a year at schools serving low-income neighborhoods.

Originally directed just to fourth graders, the program was expanded in 2002 to include second graders as Pee Wee Ambassadors. Last fall third graders were added as Junior Ambassadors, and the fourth graders then were called Senior Ambassadors. "It's all about a continuum of learning," says Francesca Jeffries, a Zoological Society instructor who teaches the Junior Ambassador program, which is sponsored by the Schregardus Family Foundation. The three-year sequence of Ambassador programs was created to enhance the life-science curriculum of participating schools.

"On my first day teaching the Junior Ambassador program, I walked into the classroom and the kids immediately started singing," remembers Francesca. "They still remembered 'the habitat song' their Pee Wee Ambassador instructor had taught them. To me, there is no greater evidence that the Animal Ambassador program has a lasting impact on these children."

The goal of the overall Animal Ambassador animal-science program is to have students become "ambassadors" to their families and communities by sharing their wildlife knowledge and passing on ways we all can help endangered species.

The Junior Ambassador program runs in the fall semester, with two in-school classroom presentations by a Zoological Society instructor and an expense-paid field trip to the Milwaukee County Zoo. For some of the children, this is their first chance to see wildlife

up close. They learn about everything from ecosystems and animal survival adaptations to the predator-prey dynamics of food chains. Upon completing the program, each of the 220 participating students receives a T-shirt.

For a presentation on how animals adapt to environments, Francesca shows them animal artifacts such as a gorilla skull, snake skins and mounted birds. She displays the oversize beak on a toucan and explains that such a beak helps toucans reach for fruit or insects to eat. She points out the bony ridge on the forehead of a red-tailed hawk, which, much like a baseball cap, provides shade for its eyes while it is hunting in direct sunlight. The artifacts always prompt questions from the class. "Is it alive? Is it dead? How did it die? Where did it come from?" She explains to them that sometimes

when animals die in the wild or at the Zoo, their bodies are donated to the Zoological Society for educational purposes.

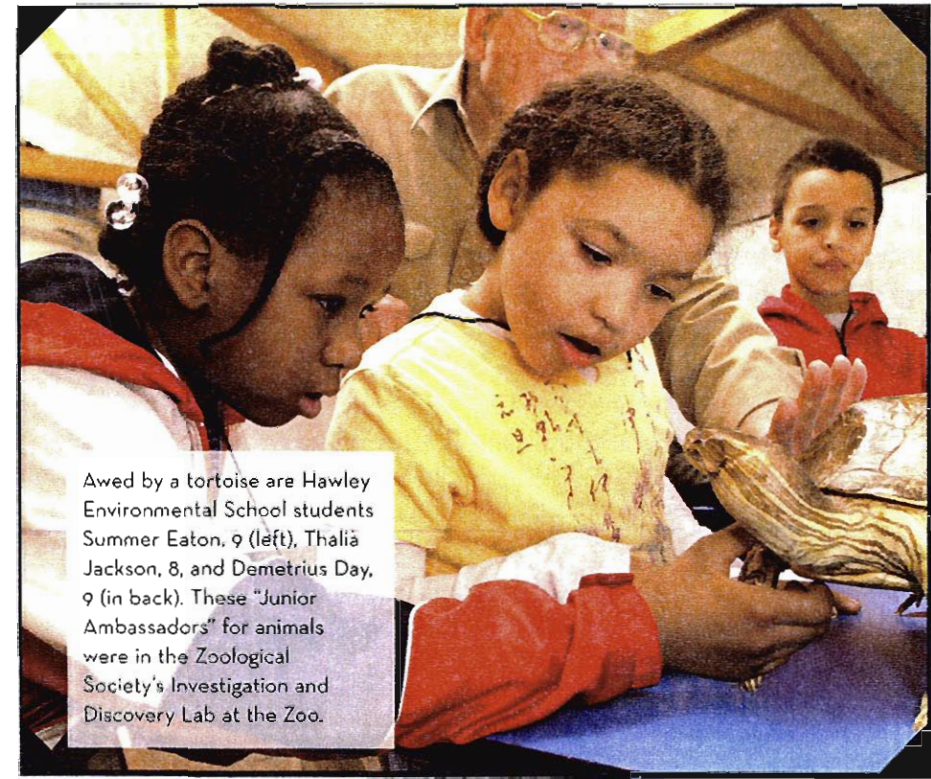
On the Junior Ambassador Zoo field trip, the students spend part of their time in the Investigation and Discovery Lab in the Education Center, where they handle artifacts, use computers to explore habitats, and look through microscopes to examine animal hair, fur and scales. The other part of their time is a guided

tour of the Aquatic & Reptile Center and Small Mammals Building. As they walk through the exhibits, students get a list of questions to answer pertaining to the vocabulary on the signs they see around them. "Focusing on vocabulary keeps the concepts in their minds and promotes reading," says Francesca.

The value of the program lies in its ability to help children who can most benefit. In some cases, the program's field trip provides students with their only chance to visit the Zoo that year. In at least five participating schools, students can advance from Pee Wee to Junior to Senior Animal Ambassadors. The three programs are linked together in that they present new material at each level while reinforcing concepts previously taught in the Ambassador sequence. James Mills, school program coordinator, reports that the students are eager to share what they have learned the year before. "It's really rewarding to see the progression of the Ambassador program have such an impact."



By Julie Lawrence



Awed by a tortoise are Hawley Environmental School students Summer Eaton, 9 (left), Thalia Jackson, 8, and Demetrius Day, 9 (in back). These "Junior Ambassadors" for animals were in the Zoological Society's Investigation and Discovery Lab at the Zoo.