

Role Model for Zoo Careers

Second-grader Mercee Fifer wants to be a veterinarian when she grows up. When she came to the Milwaukee County Zoo with classmates last fall, she had questions: How do you become a vet? What do vets do? Dr. Robert Davis was on hand with answers. He's a veterinarian, as well as president and CEO of the Zoological Society of Milwaukee (ZSM).

Mercee and her class from Milwaukee's Albert Story Elementary School, 3815 W. Kilbourn Ave., met Dr. Davis during a field trip that was part of the ZSM's Animal Ambassador program. This science-education program introduces animals and conservation to second-through-fifth-grade children from metro-Milwaukee schools in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. The program, which celebrates its 20th year in 2009, encourages kids to consider science careers and become ambassadors for wildlife.

Dr. Davis is a kind of ambassador himself. He's an accomplished vet and educator who has worked at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C., at Zoo Atlanta in Georgia, and at Chicago's Lincoln Park Zoo, among others. Now, he runs the non-profit ZSM. A role model for children who might not normally think of a career in science, he encourages kids to study science and conservation. Last fall, he was honored by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) with the AZA Outstanding Service Award for helping advance minorities in the sciences and provide zoo



Dr. Robert Davis takes a question from a Story School student as he gives the class a tour of the Zoo's elephants. Deontay Long (far left) raises his hands to ask another question.

career opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds. When he has a break in his schedule, Dr. Davis gives Zoo tours to children's groups or Animal Ambassador classes (although that's not a regular part of the program).

One sunny day in early November, Dr. Davis led the Story School kids through the Zoo's Florence Mila Borchert Big Cat Country. The children scrambled to see animals such as lions and tigers up close while Dr. Davis shared feline facts. Baby lions are called cubs, he said. Female lions do most of the hunting. The kids then toured the Zoo's elephant and giraffe exhibits. "There are two types of elephants: African and Asian," said Dr. Davis.

"How can you tell the difference?" The kids didn't know. He pointed to the ears. "See how the ears are shaped like the continent of Africa? That's how you know these are African elephants." The kids crowded around Dr. Davis, hands raised, ready to ask more Zoo questions.

"The children were really excited to come here," said Story School teacher Colleen Donovan. When Dr. Davis asked kids to name favorite animals, the answers came quickly. Lions, some said. Snow leopards, Siberian tigers and penguins also got a mention. These animals are endangered or threatened in the wild.

As head of the ZSM, Dr. Davis works to conserve endangered species at the Zoo and abroad. Later this year he will even appear on Time Warner Cable's Wisconsin on Demand channel talking about how the ZSM and the Zoo work together to help animals.

Children are animal lovers by nature, Dr. Davis said. Community leaders can inspire kids to help animals through science and conservation. When he was growing up in Chicago, Dr. Davis loved watching a children's TV show that featured a veterinarian from the city's Lincoln Park Zoo. Today, Dr. Davis himself works to encourage a generation of kids to become animal ambassadors – now and long into the future.

By Julia Kolker



Dr. Davis tells schoolchildren about Malinde the giraffe as the long-necked animal looks down at them.