

A chance to work with exotic creatures

Suburban zoo gets help from DelVal grads and students

BY BRENDA LANGE

Loving reptiles and amphibians doesn't come naturally to everyone. Owen McIntyre, '08 Small Animal Science, first fell for frogs at age five. Later, it was a python named Bertha. Throughout college, he put on the reptile shows each A-Day.

Since 2007, he's been reptile curator for the Bucks County Zoo in Warwick Township, Pa.

He cares for about 40 reptiles - including crocodiles, alligators, pythons and other crawlies - at the indoor facility, where they live in temperature-controlled housing and eat special diets. They require vigilance, since they like to try to eat each other, too.

The other full-time staff member at the zoo, Assistant Curator Amy Kart, '08 Wildlife and Conservation Management works closely with zoo owner Joe Fortunato overseeing animals, volunteers and traveling shows.

"It's amazing to see the growth since I started in September, 2007," Kart said.

She credits Delaware Valley College, about a 20-minute drive from the zoo, with her ability to cope with the job's challenges.

"DelVal preps you in so many ways. I did research in small animal labs and in the field, worked with livestock and gained lots of hands-on techniques. We also learned about animal reserves, how to increase animal populations in captivity and how humans affect these animals."

The zoo depends on volunteers - mostly DelVal students and grads - to keep 80 animals fed, their cages cleaned and more.

Some animals joined the zoo as babies and needed cuddling and bottle-feeding like their human counterparts. It's imperative, however, that attachments are minimal.

"We don't view these animals as pets," said Jessica Freeman, '09 Conservation and Wildlife Management. "They're being raised to help educate people. It's easy to bond with them, but they are wild animals, and safety comes first. So we take the time to get them comfortable with us."

Training and enrichment are important.

"Giving the animals social time and other enriching activities, such as playing with different toys, adds to their physical, mental and psychological well-being," explained Hannah Fullmer, '08 Animal Biotechnology and Conservation.

She worked for weeks with Zaboo, a young lemur who was getting "mouthy" as he grew older. Fullmer trained him using a clicker and treats, which helps the animals associate good behavior with the sound and food.

"My class with Dr. (Gary) Fortier in training and enrichment taught me how this work helps the animals avoid frustration and stay healthier," she said.

The animals' training prepares them to go out "on tour" with the Animal Junction traveling programs that educate schoolchildren and adults alike. The animals wear harnesses and learn to respond to simple commands before an audience.

The animals help Fortunato and his team teach their version of the 3 Rs—



Left to right; Danielle Balaguer '10 (holding Francesca the Fennec Fox), Hannah Fullmer '08 (with Zaboo the Ring-tailed Lemur), Owen McIntyre '08 (Monty, Burmese Python). 2nd row; Bonnie Evans (with Tank, our Sulcata Tortoise), Amy Kart '08 (holding Fiona the Kinkajou)

reduce, reuse and recycle—in order to help these and other beautiful animal specimens continue to survive.

"Every bit counts, and we all need to do our part," Kart said. "We try to impress on the students that this is not a trend but a way of life."

The only exotic animal facility in the county, Bucks County Zoo has expanded rapidly since it opened in April 2006. Fortunato realized he needed help as he added animals, and he reached out to DelVal, where he said word "snowballed." He now has a crew of 15, all but one from the college.

"We have a lot to offer students," said Fortunato, who is also known as "Jungle Joe." "They get to fulfill the 500-hour Employment Program requirement needed to graduate, they get hands-on experience with a large variety of baby and adult animals and they learn more than just cleaning and feeding. I get a lot of positive feedback."

"We can always use more help," he added. "We never say, 'We're done here.' There is always something to do."

