

From Princess to Pet Trainer

Teaching zoo visit inspires 3-year-old daughter | BY MELISSA HART

I first visited America's Teaching Zoo with my Girl Scout troop when I was a child. I don't remember all the species that leapt and twirled and barked on command, but I do recall the excitement I felt upon realizing that a parrot could recite a tongue-twister in return for a carrot and a lion would jump from here to there for a bit of freeze-dried liver. I returned home and promptly taught my rabbit to lie on its back in a baby carriage.

The teaching zoo, part of Moorpark Community College near Los Angeles, offers a two-year certification program in Exotic Animal Training and Management. Students work with more than 150 animals, representing more than 90 species, from monkeys and hyenas to bobcats and snakes. Some of the animals were rescued from owners who became overwhelmed by an exotic creature's needs. Other animals are endangered species whose survival and offspring represent hope for the continuation of that species.

Students who graduate from the program take jobs such as wildlife specialist for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, zookeeper for the San Diego Zoo, educator and animal-care specialist for Disney's Animal Kingdom, trainer for the *Animal Planet* TV show or trainer for movies such as the *Harry Potter* series. Many graduates dedicate their lives to caring for animals at shelters or training guide dogs for the blind.

The Website for America's Teaching Zoo notes: "There are long, hard days associated with the EATM program. You will be arriving at the zoo most mornings at 6 A.M. to clean and feed. Then on weekdays, you will have classes much of the day from 9 A.M. until 4 P.M. Then you will be feeding again in the evening."

I chose to pursue opera and creative writing instead of, as Dr. Dolittle mentions, deciding to "take an animal degree" and "study elephant and eagle, buffalo and beagle, alligator, guinea pig and flea," but I never forgot the thrill of that visit. When I married and moved to Eugene, Oregon, those teaching-zoo memories inspired

me to learn to train owls for educational programs at Eugene's Cascades Raptor Center—a privilege that allowed me to work with birds every day.

After my husband and I adopted our daughter, Maia, I left my owl-trainer position to focus on her. Last year, when she was 3, we flew down to California to visit my mother and went to one of the teaching zoo's weekend animal shows. I hoped Maia would watch the khaki-clad trainers asking macaws to talk and water buffalo to turn circles, and declare that, instead of her plan to become a princess, she'd decided to become an animal trainer.

The day we visited, an eloquent young woman narrated the noontime show, describing the blue crane that stepped delicately forward and the African gray parrot that spoke on command. Throughout the half-hour program, Maia appeared to be mildly interested, finally captivated by a beaver named Hudson who waddled into the room and stood up on his hind legs to receive his trainer's treat.

My mother, quicker of reflex than I, grabbed my daughter before she launched herself toward the beaver. I took Maia's excitement as a sign. "The zoo offers summer camps!" I showed her a poster. "We'll stay with Grandma for a week, and you can learn to work with animals."

But once Hudson strolled off, Maia had eyes only for the cupcakes brought by a child celebrating his birthday at the zoo. Dutifully, she papier-mâchéd

an "enrichment ball" that some animal would later bat around in its cage, then begged to go home and play dress-up. Judging by how quickly she donned her pink sparkly dress and tiara at Grandma's house, it seemed clear that Maia would remain a princess.

But not long after our California visit, I walked into the kitchen at home to find our cat, Eeyore, standing on his hind legs. In one hand, Maia held a piece of kibble aloft. I watched as Eeyore took it from her fingers. Then I went to the computer and printed the admissions information for America's Teaching Zoo. I'll keep it on file for the next 14 years ... just in case.

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