



Zoo Edition Archives - Winter/Spring 2003

Excerpts from an interview with Deborah Jensen, President and CEO of Woodland Park Zoo

WPZ: What is your job title and what duties does that entail?

DJ: I'm the President and CEO of the Woodland Park Zoo, which makes me the senior staff person responsible for setting zoo direction and managing day-to-day operations in conjunction with my senior staff. I answer to the Board of Directors and represent the zoo in the community. I also help make sure the zoo has the financial resources to stay strong and healthy.

WPZ: What's your educational background?

DJ: My undergraduate degree is in Botany and I have a Ph.D. from University of California, Berkeley from the Energy and Resources Department. This is basically an environmental science program that also includes public policy and economics. The program requires you to think about the natural sciences, economics, and policy issues when trying to solve environmental problems.

WPZ: What was your first job?

DJ: When I was 19, I took a year off from college to work as a field assistant doing field research for a professor in Arizona. It was a 30-hour a week job; I rotated every other week in the field and or in the lab. I fell in love with the Sonora desert, and found that it was really fun to do field science and research. While a student in school, I did the kind of miscellaneous jobs almost every student does to get by: bookkeeping, waiting tables, etc. I think everyone spends some time in the early part of a career doing jobs just to earn money while they look for a job that satisfies both their workplace and personal goals. There's no straight line that takes you from school to the perfect position.

WPZ: What's the best part of your job?

DJ: The people with whom I get to work.

WPZ: What are the biggest challenges of your job?

DJ: I think the biggest challenge is that Woodland Park Zoo is an organization going through a lot of change right now. It's a big balancing act to keep all of the wonderful qualities the zoo's had for the last 100 years in the middle of a lot of change. I think my challenge is to help paint a positive picture of where we could be and what we could grow into to inspire achievement of our goals. We also need to get the word out about everything we do here at the zoo. Those of us who work here every day know how much education and conservation work we do, in addition to being a fun place to go on a family outing. We have some work to do for people to come to know this other side of the zoo - the part that isn't necessarily their first impression of the zoo.

WPZ: What advice do you have for kids who want to make a difference?

DJ: The first thing is to believe that you can make a difference and that you don't have to wait until you're grown up to start. Deciding you want to make a difference and then taking action is key because life really does reward action. When you start small and take on things that are doable, you learn that results are possible. Then, it's easier to take on bigger and bigger projects. For example, one of the things we did last year at the zoo was to open the new Jaguar Cove exhibit. One of the people who helped us with the exhibit opening was an elementary school student who had decided he wanted to help our jaguar have a new home. He took all of the money he had in his piggy bank and gave it to the zoo to help pay for our jaguar's new home. He could really understand the difference he made when he saw the new exhibit. He also taught all the kids in his class that they could get involved and make a difference too. This young man is a good example of an individual seeing a problem and then resolving to take part in the solution. Finally, you have to pick something that you really care about personally because you won't devote the time and energy it takes unless it is something that really matters to you. But, the first step is believing you can make a difference.