Classrooms To Como

Bringing students closer to plants and animals is the goal of Como’s new residency programs.
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Classrooms to Como

Tour the tropical rainforests and world heritage sites of Panama with the Como Friends Travel Program.

Garden Safari Gifts

Travel with Como Friends
It’s official! Como Friends’ summer gala, Travelers Sunset Affair: Cool Cats, set another fundraising record on July 17. A sold-out crowd of 510 guests, a record-breaking Fund-a-Need and more than 300 silent auction items helped to raise more than $195,000 to benefit Como Park Zoo and Conservatory — a 40 percent increase over the previous year. Special thanks to our generous donors and sponsors who helped make the year’s biggest fundraiser a roaring success!

With nearly 4.5 million annual visitors, Como Regional Park welcomes as many annual guests as Mount Rushmore, Split Rock Lighthouse, and the Minnesota State Fair combined. Easing traffic congestion in this popular park is the goal behind $5.4 million in public bonding approved by the Minnesota State Legislature in 2014.

Como leaders will use the funding to address the highest priority transportation needs in the park in 2015, after hearing from the public this fall. “We’ll be getting input from the community and asking for their help in setting priorities before the decisions are final, but we know that we want to address a couple of traffic hotspots,” says Como Campus Manager Michelle Furrer. Potential projects include:

- Solving congestion and intersection conflicts around the Como Pool and McMurray Fields by realigning Jessamine Avenue where it crosses Como Avenue, addressing congestion at Como Avenue and Beulah Lane, and improving the functionality of the intersection at Lexington Parkway and Como Avenue.
- Adding a convenient and close drop-off solution for visitors, school buses and shuttles at the entrance of the Como Visitor Center.
- Realigning the traffic light on Midway Parkway so it lines up with pedestrian traffic patterns, and moving the entrance and exit points to the Palm Lot to mitigate congestion.

Once the priorities are approved, park leaders expect the implementation to begin in fall 2015.

To learn more about Como’s transportation plans, visit stpaul.gov and search “Como Regional Park Transportation Implementation Plan.” Notice about community input meetings will be provided on Como’s website at comozooconservatory.org this season.

The Como community is a great neighborhood that’s home to a regional treasure, and it’s our goal to make sure that our visitors and our closest neighbors can get where they’re going safely and sustainably.

-Michelle Furrer, Como Campus Manager
From front row seats to see Sparky, to tortoise training, to a captivating Q & A with orangutan expert Dr. Graham Banes, Como Friends members enjoy some unique membership perks. This fall, the fun continues with a free final spin for the season on the Cafesjian’s Carousel (bring the coupon Como Friends mailed to all members, good through October 31). Como Friends will also host a members-only after-hours reception of the Holiday Flower Show, from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. on December 11.

Keep an eye on the Como Promo e-newsletter in your inbox for more sneak peeks and member previews we’ve got planned this winter for Como’s closest friends and fans.

**Halloween’s Hashtag: #ComoZooBoo**

With 200 costumed characters and a campus full of photo cut-out stations, Como Friends’ ZooBoo fundraiser has always been a big event for family photographers. Share the fun this year on all your social media sites with the hashtag #comozooobo, and you could win a membership to Como Friends.

For every one of our five nights of fright-free fun, we’ll be posting our favorite snaps and cute costumes to Facebook and Twitter. Each day of ZooBoo, we’ll also select one winner at random to enjoy a full-year family membership to Como Friends.

Be sure to follow @ComoFriends on Twitter and Facebook, and follow the hashtag #comozooobo on Twitter and Instagram to see how community support keeps Como Park Zoo and Conservatory free and fabulous!
If you’ve ever been caught up in a bidding war over one of the exclusive travel experiences Como Friends auctions every year at Travelers Sunset Affair, you have travel agent Alyssa Schulke to blame. Since 2011, Schulke has created some of the most talked about tours for Como Friends supporters, from treks to see gorillas in the wild, to tours of windswept Patagonia.

“The trips that get the most buzz seem to be the ones that combine real experiences in the wild with some luxury accommodations that really give you a sense of place,” says Schulke, who loves seeing “the bids creep up and up and up” to benefit Como Park Zoo and Conservatory. “I’m always pleasantly surprised to see stoic Minnesotans get so competitive.”

That demand helped fuel Como Friends’ new Travel Program, which will take guests to Panama and Japan in the coming year. Schulke Travel customized the itineraries to showcase the connections between Como’s plants and animals, and to capture the culture and heritage of each country.

As a world traveler, what keeps you coming back to Como?
Gardening is a passion of mine. I took the master gardening course at the University of Minnesota, and going to the Conservatory became a wonderfully relaxing place to visit and to inspire me to keep up on my studies. It’s like my church. Gardens are also the highlight of Como Friends’ upcoming tour to Japan in November 2015, which is a great time of year for seeing the fall colors there.

For most people, Japan is a once in a lifetime trip, so we also made sure to hit the high points from a heritage and cultural perspective, so guests can experience some of the special and iconic destinations in the country. So many places you go in the world, everyone is speaking English, and in Japan, that’s still not the case. It forces you to feel like a traveler in the best way, and to really delve into a culture that’s different from ours. That’s the allure of Japan for me.

What about the trip to Panama coming up in March?
When you consider how our nations are tied together because of the Panama Canal and its history, and wildlife with so many direct ties back to the plants and animals at Como, it’s kind of the perfect storm of a destination. It’s a great place to go to experience a really different world, but it’s also really easy to get to—in the same time zone!

How can travel play a role in conservation?
I think traveling makes us better citizens of the world, and being able to see animals in their natural habitat is really spectacular—I don’t think you can beat it. Eco-tourism has become a big buzzword, but the truth is, not everyone is doing it right. It’s important to be conscious of the footprint you’re leaving behind, which is why I work very diligently to make sure that our partners share Como Friends’ conservation mission as well.

What have you learned about Como that’s surprised you?
The extent to which volunteers keep Como afloat. When you get to know Como, you realize how many people are there on a volunteer basis, keeping the organization afloat for the sheer love of the Zoo and the Conservatory. That’s pretty special.
Fewer than 10 percent of all animal facilities achieve the accreditation standards set by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. Thanks to your support, Como Zoo is one of them.

One morning in July, primate keepers in Gorilla Forest discovered that Como Zoo’s three bachelor gorillas, Virgil, Jabir and Samson, weren’t where they belonged. Though the teenage trio had only ventured into a secured behind-the-scenes hallway accessible to zookeepers, Como Zoo’s campus went into full “shut-down” mode to keep visitors and animals safe and contained.

“Virgil found the enrichment closet and he was playing with the boomer balls and throwing things around,” says senior keeper Allison Jungheim, who adds that the adolescent gorilla eventually grew bored and returned to his enclosure voluntarily.

“Fortunately, it ended up being a non-event,” says Como Campus Manager Michelle Furrer. “We have a set policy in place where everyone on the campus knows what to do, and we practice for what-if scenarios like this throughout the year.”

In fact, having a playbook for everything from wandering primates, to lost preschoolers, to threatening weather events is a requirement of all zoos and animal holding facilities accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. This governing body sets the best practice standards for animal care, outlines progressive conservation initiatives, and makes onsite inspections to see facilities and staff in action. The process
is so rigorous that fewer than 10 percent of the approximately 2,800 animal exhibitors licensed by the United States Department of Agriculture are AZA-accredited. Currently, there are only 223 AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums, including Como Zoo.

“It’s important to take the work we do and measure it against other leaders in the field,” says Jackie Sticha, president of Como Friends. “The accreditation process tells our peers and our visitors that we are committed to having the highest standards for the housing, care and conservation of animals. It’s an elite group, and our community can feel good about supporting a small metro zoo that continues to live up to some very big expectations.”

The AZA set out its latest standards for accreditation at the annual meeting in September, recommendations that Como Zoo staff will meet in the coming months through comprehensive surveys.

Your Support Helps:
Contributions to Como Friends have helped Como Zoo keep pace with progressive new standards in animal training, enrichment, and exhibit facilities set by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums.

Raising the Bar:
The AZA’s accreditation standards are always improving. Since Como Zoo’s last accreditation in 2010, nearly half of the more than 130 standards set by the AZA are new or revised. Having a diver safety plan for cleaning the pools in Polar Bear Odyssey is just one of several new protocols accreditors will examine when they visit Como Zoo this year.
that share everything from the zoo’s animal registrar system, to species preservation plans. “The standards are always going up at the same time our exhibits are changing and expanding, so it gives us the opportunity to meet with the experts on the accreditation panel, share ideas, and raise the bar on our work,” says Furrer.

For instance, Como Zoo was last accredited in 2010 prior to the opening of Polar Bear Odyssey. “We now have a diver who goes into the pools to clean those tanks, so having a diver safety plan in place is another standard that we’ll add to our accreditation process this time around.”

Once Como’s policies, procedures, records, lists, and reports have been reviewed by the accreditation committee, inspectors will spend several days at Como visiting every area, interviewing staff, checking records, and examining the physical facilities and the animal collection. The inspectors then write a detailed report about everything they saw and evaluated and submit it to the Accreditation Commission.

With two million annual visitors, Como is already the country’s seventh most visited zoo. But as a member institution of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, Como is also part of a conservation education movement that reaches more than 143 million visitors across North America every year. “The accreditation process is a lot of work for our staff, but it’s also a great confirmation that the work we do every day really makes a difference,” says Furrer.

Peer Review:
The AZA’s accreditation panel is made up of zoo directors, keepers, and veterinarians from around the country who set standards for best practice care and make site visits throughout the year.

Pop Quiz:
During the AZA inspection, Como Zoo staff have to be prepared to answer accreditor questions large and small, from “How do you manage the care for a pregnant zebra?” to “Where’s the nearest rest room?”
Community feedback fueled Como’s latest education offering — new residency programs that invite area schools to relocate to Como’s campus for immersive, multi-disciplinary learning.

Como’s school group programs have always earned high marks from area teachers, but recent feedback and focus groups told Como’s Education Department that students can sometimes leave field trips at Como feeling hungry for more.

“One of the comments we hear most often from teachers is that a field trip is only the start of learning—they wish they could take advantage of everything Como has to offer for more than just a few hours once a year,” says Susie Van Blair-com, operations manager at Como Park Zoo and Conservatory. “This campus has so many resources not just for teaching natural science and biology, but also social studies, language, math, Minnesota history, and even architectural engineering. Teachers told us they wish they could bring their kids to Como long enough that they could use these resources for cross-disciplinary learning.”

Starting this fall, students and teachers will get their wish, as Como welcomes classes from Golden Valley to White Bear Lake to a new “residency program” launching a pilot session through the academic year. Funded through a $184,000 grant from Minnesota’s Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund, the new program will host 25 elementary public, parochial, and special needs classrooms from across the metro area for a week of immersive, multi-disciplinary learning right on Como’s campus. In fact, every morning, one of Como’s flaming pink Flamingo-themed shuttle buses will pick

Round the world: Como was the starting point for global adventures every Thursday during Project Passport, a special summer enrichment program funded through the Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund this season. Thanks to this free weekly program, students got their passports stamped in “The Arctic,” learned about “The Secret Lives of Pollinators,” and explored other conservation issues before heading back to school in September.
students up at their respective schools, and deliver them to their own classroom in the Visitor Center for a day-long exploration of natural science.

“Our emphasis will be on scientific inquiry and method, giving students opportunities to use Como’s animal and plant collections to test their hypotheses with real observations,” says Como education coordinator Sarah Olson, who welcomed teachers to a week-long curriculum training session in late July. Those explorations could take them from recording their observations of primate enrichment at Como Zoo one day, to exploring how beneficial bugs go to work in the Conservatory the next. Teachers will have about an hour a day to cover curriculum that has to stay in the classroom. The rest of the day will be led by Como’s degreed education specialists, as they set across campus for “field research.”

To create the program, Olson reached out to other AZA institutions with immersive learning programs to find out the lessons other zoos and botanical gardens have learned in the process. One thing they heard from partner zoos and area teachers is that elementary school is the ideal time to take students deeper into their explorations of the natural world.

“Second grade teachers in particular have been early supporters of this program,” says Olson, adding that all 25 weeks were quickly filled by word of mouth at area schools. “Age seven or eight is a natural sweet spot for learning about conservation and the environment,” says Olson. “Kids are really open and curious about the natural world, but they’ve also got the language and observation skills to dive deeper into all of their questions.”

Como’s lesson plan even extends to the lunch period, as students will have the chance to weigh what they eat, calculate their carbon footprint, and learn new ways to curb waste and recycle more.

“We’re really excited about meeting more than 600 elementary school kids and showing them all the ways there are to connect with Como,” Olson says, adding that studies show nonformal educational experiences at zoos and botanical gardens help young people retain and recall information about natural science and the environment.

“This is a program that was really inspired by our community,” says Van Blaircom. “We look forward to reporting back what we learn in the process, so that we can be an even better educational partner to the schools that depend on Como.”

Summer Scholars: Slithering snakes, hissing cockroaches, and cuddly hedgehogs are always popular attractions at Nature Walk stations, and this summer so were iPads. The educational tablets—provided through Como Friends—were part of a new student-led initiative to create interactive interpretive learning at the Nature Walk stations, where 45 volunteer teens connect with nearly 200,000 visitors each summer.

“At the start of the summer, our Nature Walkers made some fun true-and-false tests and slideshows for visitors,” says operations manager Susie Van Blaircom, noting that the iPads seemed to encourage visitors to spend more time interacting with interpretive volunteers and asking questions. “As the students get more comfortable with the technology, they’re driving this initiative in new directions that other young visitors really seem to enjoy.”
Here’s a sanity-saving holiday tip for Como Insiders: Take your shopping list to Garden Safari Gifts.

“Long-time Como Friends members know that one of the best perks is the 20 percent discount we offer to members and volunteers just before the holidays,” says Garden Safari Gifts manager Terri Scheunemann. “It’s our way of saying thanks for your support, and inviting visitors to experience Como when it’s a little quieter.” Once schools are back in session, and the holiday shopping season is in full swing, she says, “Como is a great alternative to the shopping mall. You can cut the holiday stress with a tour of the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory or the Como Zoo before notching a few things from your list, and you can feel good knowing that every purchase you make helps support the work you care about at Como.”

During the members-only preview of the Holiday Flower Show on December 11, from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m., Garden Safari Gifts will provide free gift-wrapping for every purchase, from fun new plush toys, to cozy Como-themed fleece, and collectible Bonsai. Clever animal-themed tops and loungewear in child through adult sizes are also hot sellers during our coldest months. “We pride ourselves on stocking some hard to find ‘only at Como’ gift items,” says Scheunemann. “Where else in the Twin Cities will you find the perfect sloth plush?”

**Cuteness for a Cause:** Did you know that plush toys make up nearly one-third of all purchases at Garden Safari Gifts, where proceeds help to pay for programs at Como Zoo and the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory?
Receiving duplicate mailings?
Please help us to reduce mailing costs and paper.
If you receive more than one issue of the Como Insider, call our office at (651) 487-8229

Please Recycle

Pack for Panama with Como Friends
March 14-22, 2015
Cost: $4,995 per person, not including airfare
Join Como Friends in March 2014 for an unforgettable nine-day tour of the tropical rainforests and world heritage sites of Panama. Created in partnership with our friends at Schulke Travel and International Expeditions, our itinerary will immerse you in the amazing flora and fauna of this Caribbean wonder, with excursions led by expert naturalists.

Reservations for Como Friends’ trip to Panama are already half filled. E-mail Jackie.Sticha@comofriends.org to sign up for our next conservation adventure!