Como Friends is a nonprofit 501(c) 3 organization whose mission is to inspire community generosity to advance Como Park Zoo and Conservatory as a destination where people from all walks of life can gather, learn and enjoy the natural world.

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Como Park Zoo and Conservatory's mission is to inspire our public to value the presence of living things in our lives.

Como is open every day of the year!
Winter Hours (October 1 – March 31)  10 a.m. – 4 p.m.
Summer Hours (April 1 – September 30)  10 a.m. – 6 p.m.

Como Park Zoo and Conservatory is accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). Look for the AZA logo whenever you visit a zoo or aquarium as your assurance that you are supporting a facility dedicated to providing excellent care for animals, a great experience for you, and a better future for all living things.

Como is a member of the American Public Gardens Association (APGA) serving and strengthening public gardens throughout North America by supporting and promoting their work, value and achievements in horticultural display, education, research and plant conservation.

Graphic Design:
Matt Wehner
Editor:
Laura Billings Coleman

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ZooBoo in the News
Trendy or traditional, Como Friends’ ZooBoo fundraiser is always a crowd-pleaser

Halloween has become a hot holiday for nonprofit fundraisers, according to The Wall Street Journal which recently featured Como Friends’ long-running ZooBoo benefit in its coverage about how other charities are learning how to make the most out of trick-or-treat season. “Halloween is now a trendy theme for charities, but we’ve been hosting ZooBoo for 28 years, so I guess you could say we’re a little ahead of the trend,” says Caroline Mehlhop, Como Friends’ Director of Sponsorships & Events.

This year, Como Friends’ ZooBoo at Como Zoo welcomed more than 17,000 guests—including many parents who remember attending the event when they were kids. The festive, four-night event also brought together more than 800 volunteers, including a master pumpkin carver, dozens of coffee house hosts, more than 200 costumed characters, and even Scooby Doo’s Mystery Machine.

“One trend we are noticing is ZooBoo is becoming a popular community service site for corporate groups,” Mehlhop says. For instance, a team of more than 35 volunteers from Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota helped transform Como Zoo’s grounds by setting up decorations, and returning to take them down. “It’s a great place to commit a short amount of time to a high-impact event, which is what makes it so appealing to large volunteer groups.”

Visitors are also giving high marks to the healthy snacks donated for trick-or-treat bags, including Crystal Farms Cheese, Annie’s Bunny Grahamss, fresh fruit from the Pear Bureau and Cub Foods, and Bolthouse Farms baby carrots. The more than 190,000 items donated for the event all benefit the bottom line, allowing Como Friends to raise more than $50,000 for Como Park Zoo and Conservatory this year. “Whether it’s trendy or traditional, there’s no question ZooBoo is a fun way for families to support what they love about Como,” says Mehlhop.

Buy Your Bouquets Tickets
With an expanding beer garden and a popular VIP option, tickets to the February fundraiser are going fast

After transplanting the Bouquets wine-tasting event from December to February last year, the event appears to be flourishing in its new season and is bound for another sold-out gathering on February 25 from 7:00 p.m. to 9:30 pm. “You worry about moving an event that supporters have built their social calendars around for years, but our guests told us that mid-winter would be an even better time for Bouquets, and they’ve turned out to support it in force,” says Como Friends President Jackie Sticha.

General admission tickets to Como Friends’ most spirited fundraiser are available online at comofriends.org for $60 per person. A $125 VIP option will bring up to 70 guests to Gorilla Forest to an exclusive experience with zookeeper talks, special beer and wine pours and high-end restaurants. With gourmet treats provided by such local favorites as Muffuletta and Mojo Monkey Donuts, an unparalleled array of global wines, and a growing beer garden featuring craft beer, Bouquets may be the perfect foodie fundraiser. All proceeds help make Como Park Zoo and Conservatory the best it can be today, and even better tomorrow. Buy your tickets today!
Sparky@60

Evolving with the times, Minnesota’s most iconic animal ambassador gets ready for a remodel.
Sea lions are gregarious by nature, but Como Zoo’s 7-year-old Subee raises sociability to a new level. When aquatics keepers cross the threshold into the California sea lion’s exhibit area, Subee hauls out of the water at high speed, skidding to a stop at the feet of senior zoo keeper Allison Jungheim.

“Coming to say hello?” Jungheim teases, as Subee’s long whiskers twitch with excitement. “Of course she wants to find out if there’s food, but she’s also one of those animals who really lights up when she’s being trained. She loves to learn, so she’s got a great temperament for taking on the Sparky tradition.”

After a summer spent doing her homework in “Sparky School,” the theme for last season’s Sparky the Sea Lion Show, Subee will make her official debut as Sparky in 2016, becoming the seventh sea lion in almost as many decades to perform for the crowds at Como Zoo. While her predecessor CC, Sparky VI, earned a reputation among trainers for her entertaining diva-like tendencies, Subee has an ecstatic approach to swimming and diving that’s all her own. “Her energy is unbelievable, and she likes to do things with a little extra flourish,” Jungheim says.

Subee arrived at Como in 2010, after being rehabilitated at a marine mammal rescue site in California following what veterinarians believe was a shark attack. An injured right rear flipper, shattered cartilage and scar tissue made her a risk for survival in the wild, but the 190-pound sea lion still has plenty of energy to pester her pool-mates, 25-year-old CC, and Mystic, CC’s 33-year-old mother.

“Subee is a great ambassador for her species, but she’s also a good representative of the many rescue animals we have at Como Zoo,” says Como campus director Michelle Furrer. In the aquatics building, harbor seals Fletcher and Ginger were also rescue animals deemed unreleasable in the wild, while Subee’s first roommate, a male sea lion named Chino, had a permanently scarred face from a nearly-fatal tangle with a fishing net. (The 600-pound male sea lion now lives at Omaha’s Henry Doorly Zoo as part of a breeding recommendation.) “Some of Subee’s injuries mean we’ll have to keep a close eye on her for arthritis and other health problems down the line, but the great care she’s had at Como has given her a second chance at a good, long life,” says Furrer. “In that way, she’s also a great example of the evolution Como Zoo has made when it comes to animal conservation.”

**From carnival act to conservation ambassador**

As long-time Como visitors will remember, the original Sparky Show wasn’t about conservation at all—instead it played to the carnival atmosphere common to zoos in the 1950s.

Though Sparky’s been a Minnesota tradition for 60 years, her story actually got its start at a gas station in The Dalles, Oregon, where owner Archie Brand had a small collection of trained animals, including a male sea lion named Flipper who displayed serious acting chops. (“Flipper was a natural actor,” Brand once told *The Milwaukee Sentinel.* “He was a lot smarter than I was. I was
full of stage fright.

The pair became a popular touring act at sportsman fairs and summer carnivals, but at the urging of St. Paul businessman and broadcaster Stan Hubbard Sr., Brand and his sea lion show made Como Zoo their home base in 1956.

Before she had an amphitheater of her own, Sparky performed right on the Zoo grounds, balancing beach balls on her nose, honking bike horns, and performing hula hoop tricks. “In those days, people thought about zoos purely as entertainment,” say Furrer. “Kids rode tortoises, and keepers walked large cats around on leashes. The emphasis was on amusement versus the education and conservation that you see today.”

Brand’s stepson Norman Byng carried on the tradition, joining the Sparky show in the early 70s, and taking over when Brand retired in 1979. With a grueling three-times-a-day show schedule during the early years, it’s been estimated that Como hosted more than 10,000 Sparky shows by 1997, the year Como Zoo celebrated its first centennial. While successive sea lions took on the starring role of “Sparky,” the animal most Minnesotans may remember is Sparky V, who performed between 1981 and 2001—the longest tenure for any of Como Zoo’s sea lions. When he died in 2009 at the age of 31, Sparky had doubled the average life span of his wild cousins to become the second oldest male California sea lion in captivity. “We still talk about Sparky V,” says Jungheim. “He was just the best animal you can imagine.”

When Byng retired, Como’s aquatics keepers took over the animal training effort, instituting a new operant conditioning training program paid for by the brand-new fundraising group now known as Como Friends. The more progressive approach to animal care relies on positive reinforcement to stimulate animals’ natural behaviors, encouraging animals to participate in their own health care. That meant eliminating the public feeding pool at Seal Island, and using daily training sessions to build the bonds between animals and keepers. The shift quickly lowered aggression between the seals and sea lions because they were no longer competing with each other for food. It also allowed keepers to provide good geriatric care to aging animals like Sparky V, who even cooperated with trainers to remove a skin lesion with local anesthetic.

“In the old days, we would have to crate an animal and put them under to provide that kind of care, but the training program has made so many more things possible,” says Jungheim. “That’s especially important when you’re working with animals that will live much longer than they would in the wild, and have some health concerns like cataracts, arthritis and other problems related to their age.”

Over time, Como’s operant conditioning training program has expanded to include reptiles, amphibians, birds and nearly every mammal at Como, from tiny 6-ounce primates to 1,000-pound polar bears. Even so, the pinnipeds remain the most visible ambassadors for the training program’s successes. “The way it’s evolved, the Sparky Show is itself a training program that showcases all of the behind-the-scenes encounters that take place between...
keepers and animals every day,” says Furrer. “When keepers train a polar bear to present a paw for a voluntary blood draw, they’re using the same techniques and positive reinforcement visitors see every summer in the Sparky Show.”

A New Seals and Sea Lions Habitat

Daily animal training sessions are a big attraction at Como Zoo, where more than 100,000 visitors every year drop in on a demonstration for primates, polar bears, or pinnipeds—the three most popular draws. While Polar Bear Odyssey and Gorilla Forest were built specifically to showcase these sessions, Seal Island was never designed for training—in fact, it wasn’t intended for seals at all. “What we call ‘Seal Island’ was originally built during the WPA era as Monkey Island, and it used to be the home to monkeys, alligators, and apparently even bears—though I can’t even imagine what that was like,” Jungheim says. The exhibit was retrofitted in the late 1970s to display seals and sea lions, but its design features have long posed a challenge to people and pinnipeds alike. Keepers must cross a retractable bridge to reach the island for daily training sessions, where it’s difficult to separate animals for special care. The surrounding pool also lacks the filtration system necessary for salt water, forcing the animals to move indoors to the aquatics building for nearly nine months every year.

Inside, the larger pool best suited to Como Zoo’s three sea lions is sited opposite the feeder pool to the Sparky amphitheater. This past summer, that required keepers to close the aquatics building for a set time every day to allow CC, Mystic, and Subee to “walk” from one side to another on their way to the show—an inconvenience the sea lions may have enjoyed more than their keepers. “Some days they like to stop and look at the penguins,” Jungheim says.

Resolving many of these challenges is the motivation behind a major remodeling plan for the seal and sea lion exhibit, says Jackie Sticha, president of Como Friends, which paid for the development of a new design plan. “Sparky is such a big part of what drives visitors to Como Zoo that the seals and sea lions deserve to be our top priority when it comes to creating more naturalistic and progressive habitats,” she says. With renewed accreditation from the Association of Zoos and Aquariums confirmed in September 2015, “We’re also very mindful of that fact that Como Zoo needs to keep pace with modern zoological practices for marine mammal care, and we know that in the near future, Como’s current facility simply won’t be able to meet those standards.”

The $14.5 million remodeling plan calls for several major upgrades including a salt water filtration system that will allow seals and sea lions to swim outdoors year-round—just as they would in the wild. The immersive design of the habitat will allow keepers to conduct training sessions in several different locations, each designed with natural substrate, rock work and plantings that will evoke the Pacific coastline habitat. With a newly shaded amphitheater and underwater views of animals, the multi-layered habitat will give visitors better views and greater insights into the natural behaviors and native intelligence of marine mammals.

“This plan is definitely modeled on the success of Polar Bear Odyssey and Gorilla Forest, and moving Como Zoo toward those more naturalistic and engaging settings,” says Sticha. “One Statewide Resources: Advocacy efforts are a growing part of the mission at Como Friends, which helped double Como’s Legacy Amendment funding from $500,000 to $1 million a year for the biennium. Every season, a select delegation of Como’s animal ambassadors travel to the State Capitol to highlight why Como is Minnesota’s most visited cultural destination. Pictured above: Sen. John Marty and Como Zoo keeper Bree Barney and Chloe the sloth meet at the Capitol.
of the big lessons we’ve learned from each of those projects is that when you make habitats better for animals, you make them better for visitors, too.”

**Making a splash across Minnesota**

Public enthusiasm for Polar Bear Odyssey was so high that Como welcomed 2.2 million visitors the year it opened—more than a 10 percent surge over Como’s average annual attendance of just under two million. While major upgrades clearly drive attendance at Como, Minnesota’s most visited cultural institution, recent projects have also helped drive the state’s economy. For instance, the $11 million in public funding that paid for the Gorilla Forest expansion, opened in 2013, created more than 200 jobs and $24 million in economic impact for the region.

“Como has been a tourist destination for five generations, and every year, we can see we have visitors from more than 60 Minnesota counties,” says Nancy Nelson, chair of Como Friends’ board of directors. This year, the board commissioned an economic impact study conducted by Sapphire Consulting that found that visits to Como Park Zoo and Conservatory are a major part of Twin Cities tourism, generating an estimated $162.7 million in economic impact statewide. “That’s why we’re working hard to make the case at the Capitol this year that Como merits public funding, because we truly serve a statewide audience.”

This fall, Como was one of several Minnesota institutions to host lawmakers for a series of sight-seeing tours, studying bonding requests that will come before the Legislature later this year. “Those visits are really valuable, because if you haven’t been to Como in the last decade, you may not realize that this ‘old-time’ Minnesota tradition has really been transformed by some very forward-looking projects, from the Visitor Center to one of the nation’s best polar bear exhibits,” says Sticha. “When legislators hear that we’re able to welcome two million visitors from every part of the state for about $4 per person, compared to five and ten times that at other less visited destinations, they understand the value of investing taxpayer dollars at Como Park Zoo and Conservatory.”

**Personalizing nature, one splash at a time**

Creating a new home for Sparky and her friends may also reap returns that are harder to measure—but no less valuable.

“As a former teacher, I can tell you that the connections kids are making when they get face to face with an animal like Sparky are more powerful and memorable than anything you can learn about nature in a book,” says Nelson.

In fact, a recent report in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* found that conservation messages that anthropomorphize nature, fostering a “personal” connection to an animal like Sparky the Sea Lion or Smokey the Bear, make children and adults feel more connected to the environment, and more accountable for making wise choices.

“If you’ve been to a Sparky show you know that intuitively,” says Nelson. “Sparky captures and holds kids’ attention in a way that makes it possible to explain what we need to do for animals in need, and why we need to take care of the environment. That’s the conservation message that drives everything we do at Como Park Zoo and Conservatory, and Sparky is the gateway. Sparky makes it personal.”

To learn more about plans to improve Como Zoo’s aquatic exhibit, visit comofriends.org. To add your voice to advocacy efforts, email comomembership@comofriends.org.
A Conversation With Como Insider Scott Dongoske

During his long tenure at Como Zoo, Toby the Galapagos tortoise carried a whole generation of Minnesota school kids on his back—including long-time Como Friends board member Scott Dongoske. “One of my earliest memories is coming with my class on the train for a field trip day at Como,” says Dongoske, president of the Minneapolis-based law firm Winthrop & Weinstine. “You could ride the tortoise, you could see the Sparky Show—it was just a great day for a kid.”

While the Como field trip tradition is still alive and well, Toby has long since retired to Hawaii, living at the Honolulu Zoo as part of a breeding program. “The changes in animal care at zoos like Como have been so dramatic,” says Dongoske, who recently talked with Insider about the transformation Como Friends has helped to fuel over the last 15 years. “Seeing the way things have improved at Como since I was a kid is one of the things that’s been so gratifying about being part of Como Friends.”

It’s almost hard to imagine that there was a time when people could actually ride a tortoise, but it was only a generation ago. It seems almost barbaric by our standards now, but that was the way zoos operated at the time. But in the 70s, 80s, and 90s, we learned so much about animal care and conservation that the focus has shifted toward education and teaching people about what makes these animals so special. It’s been a great thing to watch.

You were part of the first working team that came together to create Como Friends. What was Como like in the 90s, and why was that effort important?

At the time, Como was really struggling—it didn’t have adequate funding from government or private partners, and it wasn’t keeping up with the changes people wanted to see in animal habitats. So animal care has been a big part of the mission of Como Friends?

Absolutely. One of Como’s challenges is that it has a small footprint—just 11 acres—so what we’re trying to do now is to build excellent habitats for a small number of animals. The whole idea is to create immersive environments where people can see animals in a place that’s more like their natural habitat, because it’s a better experience for the animals, and for the people looking at them, too.

Como is getting ready for a major update to the seals and sea lions habitat. What should Como Friends supporters know about it?

It’s going to be just a tremendous upgrade from what we have right now. It’s going to create a year-round outdoor experience for the animals, which is more like how they live in the wild. People might not realize that many of the pinnipeds we’ve got at Como Zoo now are actually rescue animals—Subee the sea lion survived a shark attack, and the seals Fletcher and Ginger both came from marine mammal rehab centers in California. With their injuries, they wouldn’t be able to make it in the wild, but the great care they get at Como gives them a second chance.

The seals and sea lions were the first animals at Como Zoo to take part in a positive reinforcement training program that now includes nearly every animal at Como. Why was that program one of Como Friends’ first investments?

In the old days, zookeepers had to put animals under anesthesia to check on them. Now with the training program, the keepers have so much trust with the animals they often don’t need to do that. Last year, Como became one of the first zoos ever to get a voluntary blood draw from the polar bears, which means they can monitor their health without causing stress for the bears. It’s pretty amazing. And I think one of the reasons Como gets two million visitors every year is because people appreciate the progress they’re seeing. It just makes people feel good to know animals are getting the care they deserve.
Flowers and Fireworks: The final event of the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory’s Centennial year was focused on the future-creating a $1 million endowment fund to sustain the Charlotte Partridge Ordway Japanese Garden. “We’re thrilled to report that our supporters have pledged $830,000 toward the effort, with significant gifts made during our final Toast to the Conservatory,” says Como Friends president Jackie Sticha. “It was a special night for our guests that showcased not only the beauty of Como’s gardens, but also the fascinating horticultural science that keeps the Conservatory in full bloom.”
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Celebrating a Century with Como Friends: More than 125 guests gathered to raise a final toast to the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory’s Centennial year.

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Garden Safari Gifts

Find animal plush in nearly every species and size at Garden Safari Gifts

Como Zoo is the home of 37 different species preservation plans, but this season, Garden Safari Gifts is home to even more varieties of animal plush.

Garden Safari Gifts is operated by Como Friends, so every purchase helps the plants and animals you love thrive at Como Park Zoo and Conservatory.

LOCATION
Visitor Center at Como Park Zoo & Conservatory

PHONE: 651.487.8222
HOURS: Daily 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.