

C O M O F R I E N D S

# INSIDER

Winter 2023 | Volume 25 | Number 1

## In Memory of Amanda

*A fixture at Como Zoo, famous for her art work and her flair with textiles, Amanda the orangutan, who died at 46, was the quintessential animal ambassador, a gregarious great ape who helped to personalize nature while inspiring visitors to protect it.*

Photo by Susannah Bauchlin

HOW COMO CARES



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1225 Estabrook Drive | St. Paul, MN 55103 | 651.487.8229  
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Como Friends is a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization whose mission is to inspire community generosity in support of Como Park Zoo and Conservatory so it thrives for generations to come.

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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 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.



The American Public Gardens Association (APGA) serves and strengthens public gardens throughout North America by supporting and promoting their work, value and achievements in horticultural display, education, research and plant conservation.



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**Winter Hours:** (October 1 – March 31) 10 am – 4 pm  
**Summer Hours:** (April 1 – September 30) 10 am – 6 pm

### COMO FRIENDS INSIDER

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## COMO NEWS & EVENTS

### COMO FRIENDS' BOUQUETS TICKETS GOING FAST! BOUQUETS, FEBRUARY 23, 7:00 PM TO 9:30 PM



### Thank You Sponsors and Partners!



Imagine a moonlit winter night where warmth and wine mingle beneath Como's iconic Palm Dome. The Marjorie McNeely Conservatory is the magical backdrop for Bouquets, Como Friends' annual winter fundraiser, featuring extraordinary wine, beer, food, and fun. A favorite tradition for Como insiders, tickets to this spirited benefit are now available online. Plan a unique winter date night that also supports the animals and plants we all treasure at Como Park Zoo and Conservatory by purchasing your tickets today!

**Tickets can be purchased at**  
**comofriends.org/events/bouquets**

### FOLLOW US ON SOCIAL MEDIA



For even more inside tips and real time news about all things Como, be sure to follow Como Friends and Como Park Zoo and Conservatory on all of our social media channels. From job openings and fresh postings, to Como Park Zoo and Conservatory's terrific new TikTok account, get your recommended dose of animals, plants and people by connecting to Como.





## COMO NEWS & EVENTS



### BECOME A SUSTAINER TODAY

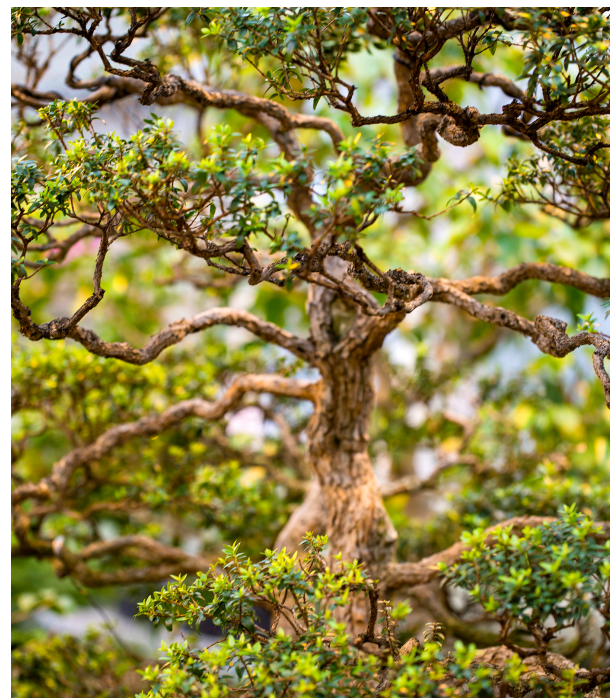
As a Como Friends sustaining member, you keep Como Park Zoo and Conservatory admission free and accessible to all.

Sign up for monthly contributions and provide Como with a steady source of support.

It's an easy, efficient, and green way to invest in Como. To join go to

[comofriends.org/support/monthlygiving](https://comofriends.org/support/monthlygiving).

*Thank you!*



### LEAVE A LEGACY

Como Park Zoo and Conservatory is a world class natural wonder in the heart of the city. Like all treasures, it needs a special kind of care—a constant presence looking out for its wellbeing and safekeeping. Include Como in your estate plan and leave a legacy so that future generations can enjoy this beloved treasure.

**For more information contact Laurel Lundberg, Director of Individual Giving, at: [laurel.lundberg@comofriends.org](mailto:laurel.lundberg@comofriends.org) or 651-487-8296.**

## COMO NEWS & EVENTS



*July 20, 2023*

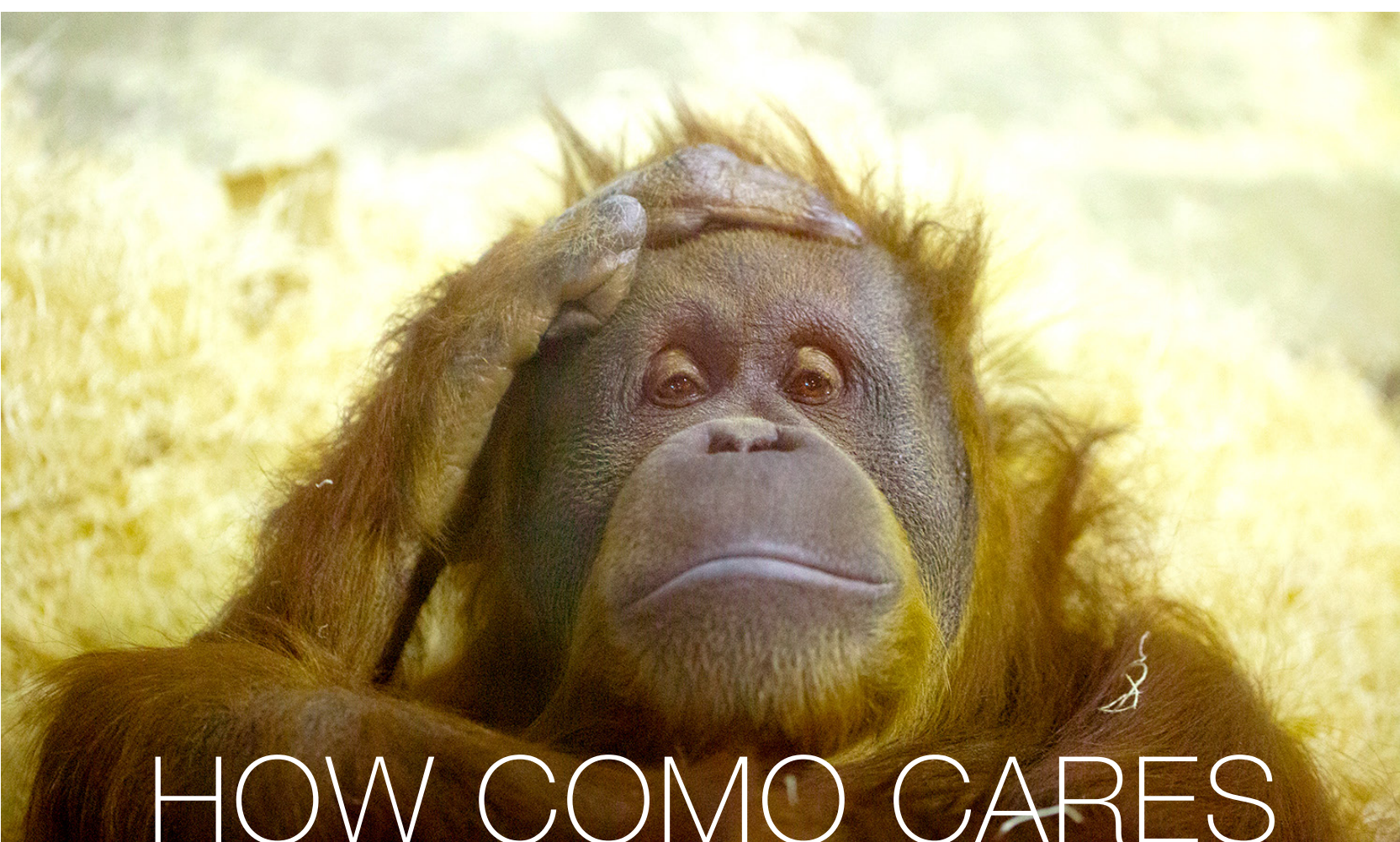
As you start your summer planning, be sure to save the date for Sunset Affair. Como Friends' premier event of the summer is returning on Thursday, July 20 with up-close encounters with amazing animals and plants, festive food and drinks, and of course, Sunset Affair's famous silent auction. A never-miss-it event for many longtime supporters, joining us at Sunset Affair is a great way to learn more about the Como Friends community, and how private support makes even more possible at Minnesota's most visited cultural destination. Watch your inbox or visit our updated website at [comofriends.org](https://comofriends.org) for more details and ticket sales information.



### *Thanks for Making a Million Visitors' Days in 2022*

An urban oasis that belongs to us all, Como Park Zoo and Conservatory is always the perfect destination for a day brightener. More than a million visitors came to Como Park Zoo and Conservatory in 2022, taking time to smell the roses in the Sunken Garden, or taking in the splashy new SPIRE Sparky Show. And thanks to your support for Como Friends, free admission and family-friendly programs made Como accessible to all, every day of the year. Gifts of every size make a difference at Como, helping us to care for amazing plants and animals, and to make the day of every visitor who walks through our doors. *Thank you!*





# HOW COMO CARES

*For Como Zoo keepers, humane animal care can make for heartbreaking decisions*



Amanda in 1986, at the age of 10, and an original painting by Amanda.

Orangutans and humans share 97 percent of the same DNA, but for Como Zoo’s Amanda the orangutan, those similarities always seemed much greater. From her favorite perches, high above her outdoor habitat or pressed against the bay window in Como Zoo’s primate building, Amanda could often be seen taking in the sights and gazing upon visitors with the same curiosity, bemusement and wonder that visitors had for her.

Born at the Gladys Porter Zoo in Brownsville, Texas, Amanda arrived at Como Zoo at the age of 3, charming a whole generation of visitors and keepers with her open gaze, mischievous temperament, and obvious intellect. As Como Zoo primate keeper Megan Elder often joked about meeting Amanda for the first time, “She had me at ‘hello.’ Or instead of ‘hello,’ insert a raspberry sound. She was my best friend and coworker for 20 years, and a beautiful soul in every way.”

The oldest animal at Como Zoo, Amanda celebrated her 46th birthday in December just days before being diagnosed with an inoperable abdominal mass that was causing chronic damage to her kidneys. After weighing the risks of treatment against her poor prognosis and diminishing quality of life, her keepers at Como Zoo and a team of veterinary specialists at the University of Minnesota

made the difficult decision to humanely euthanize the hybrid orangutan.

“It was a painful decision for everyone, but it was also unanimous,” says Elder, who is also the Orangutan Species Survival Coordinator for the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, and International Orangutan Studbook Keeper responsible for managing the genetic history of all of the estimated 3,000 orangutans in human care. “She was in pain, and we didn’t want her to suffer.”

Amanda died on December 17, surrounded by the keepers who adored her. When the news broke, St. Paul Mayor Melvin Carter declared an official Amanda the Orangutan Day, while hundreds of visitors to Facebook sent their sympathies to Como Zoo’s staff.

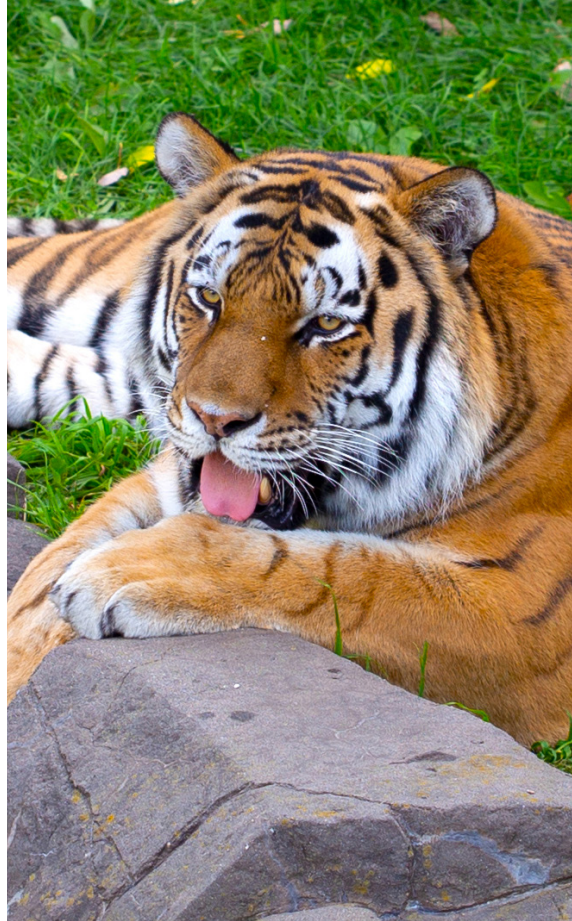
“Zoos teach visitors to value the natural world by encouraging us to empathize and connect with animals on a personal level, and I can’t think of another animal at Como Zoo who did that better than Amanda,” says Jackie Sticha, President of Como Friends. “Few of us

will ever get a chance to see an orangutan in the wild, but so many Como visitors have come to care deeply about orangutan survival because of their connection with Amanda. She will be greatly missed.”

*As Como Zoo primate keeper Megan Elder often joked about meeting Amanda for the first time, “She had me at ‘hello.’ Or instead of ‘hello,’ insert a raspberry sound. She was my best friend and coworker for 20 years, and a beautiful soul in every way.”*

Amanda’s care team: Zookeepers Mikey, Geoff, Michelle, Em, Caitlin, Megan and Senior Keeper, Jill Erzar. Not pictured, Vet Tech, Andrea Persson.





With more than a thousand animals of 215 different species in Como's care, death is part of the natural life cycle at Como Zoo. Even so, 2022 felt especially challenging, as Como Zoo said goodbye to a number of iconic animals well known to the public.

*Sealia, a.k.a. CC*, the 31-year-old sea lion who was Como Zoo's sixth Sparky, was humanely euthanized in April following several weeks of deteriorating health and failing kidneys. Another Como Harbor inhabitant, *Stanley, a three-year-old Atlantic gray seal* who was functionally blind, died following a surgery to relieve the calcium deposits that had formed on his eyes. Anesthesia is risky for seals and sea lions who are adapted to diving and holding their breath for long periods of time, a process that includes slowing the heart, and shunting blood away from the extremities. When the team was ready to wake Stanley, his monitored values showed that he had gone into a dive response. Despite the team's efforts, Stanley never awoke from surgery.

Losses like this are hard on the whole zookeeping staff, says senior keeper Jill Erzar. "But being transparent about these events is an important way to tell the public about how much effort goes into life and death decisions about animal care," she says, noting that there's an even longer list of Como Zoo animals whose lives were saved or improved by major interventions over the last year. Here's a look at a few of them:

*Dental Surgery for Tsar*: A few years ago, Tsar the tiger went into cardiac arrest during a root canal and nearly died. "Dr. Fausto Bellezzo, our partner at the University of Minnesota, jumped on him and did the most heroic CPR to bring him back," says Erzar. "But we were very hesitant to immobilize him again." When it became clear Tsar needed the procedure again in October, Como consulted with a team of tiger experts to help minimize the high risks of putting large cats under anesthesia, preparing for "every possible scenario we could imagine," says Erzar. With 17 keepers and specialists assembled, this year's procedure went "like clockwork," and the 9-year-old tiger is back on the prowl.

*Hormone Therapy for Forest*: When they're growing, reindeer antlers are covered in a complex vascular network called "velvet" that sheds as the antler hardens. But without the usual surge of male hormones required to boost the process, Forest's antlers became a bloody mess, causing the castrated reindeer to collapse on exhibit last year. "Como vet tech Andrea Persson raced in and got a tourniquet on him right way," says Erzar. This year, keepers found a much simpler solution—a short-term hormone implant that's helped the reindeer develop and drop his antlers according to schedule.

*Cataract Surgery for Gomez*: One of the longest-lived spider monkeys at Como, 31-year-old Gomez was also one of its most recognizable, coming directly up to the bay window of his habitat and shading his eyes to get a better look at visitors. "For decades, he had cataracts that were infringing on his vision, and that was his unique way of dealing with light sensitivity," explains primate keeper Em Brunmeier. In March, Gomez had successful cataract surgery that will allow him to

see well into his golden years. "We still see him shade his eyes at times, but it's more of a reflex or a little salute at this point," says Brunmeier.

*Helping Jasper Navigate*: Orphaned in the wild and brought to Como Zoo in 2018, mountain lions Jasper and Ruby have always stayed close together, and this year, a medical exam may have found the reason. "Jasper has progressive retinal atrophy, retinal tissue that either never forms or is not connected quite right or is lost over time," says Erzar. Knowing more about his visual impairment has helped keepers determine a better plan for his care, which will involve keeping him outdoors where he's most comfortable. "We are very lucky he has Ruby and they are close, because we do see her help him out," Erzar says, adding that while his functional blindness won't hurt his quality of life, it may help visitors feel more connected to the cougar. "When you see an animal that's dealing with a challenge that a lot of humans face as well, it helps build that connection and that empathy about what humans and animals have in common."



# A BEAUTIFUL PARTNERSHIP

*Volunteers from the Minnesota Bonsai Society have helped the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory cultivate one of the Midwest's best collections*

With their Lilliputian leaves, undulating branches, and fairytale trunks, bonsai can sometimes seem like they come from another world. That's why Como horticulturist Reva Kos tries to take the mystery out of these miniature potted trees when she talks with curious visitors at the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory.

"I want visitors to know that really anyone can create a bonsai," says Kos (pictured top left), who has served as the curator of Como's bonsai collection for the past decade. "They're special trees because of how we take care of them, but they're just trees. They're not magically small—they're just well loved."

Over the last three decades, the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory's bonsai collection has been very well loved—not only by Como's horticultural staff, but also by the Minnesota Bonsai Society. Starting in the early 90s, when First Bank donated a sizable collection of bonsai to the Conservatory, a long list of dedicated volunteers from the Minnesota Bonsai Society (MBS) have contributed their time and expertise in training one of the best bonsai collections for public display in the Midwest. "We wouldn't have the collection we have without the Bonsai Society," says Kos. "Working with our volunteers is a collaboration. Everyone who works with bonsai is opinionated about what should happen next with a tree, and it's fun to bounce ideas off each other."



MBS member Kirk Hedberg agrees (pictured right). "With other kinds of artwork, like painting or sculpture, you'll reach a point where you know it's done, but the thing that's fascinating about bonsai is that you're never done—the tree keeps growing and adapting, and you come to an agreement with the tree over a long period of time about how it's going to look. The tree has ideas and you have ideas, and they're not always going to mesh."

A bonsai enthusiast since the 1970s, Hedberg, a retired chemistry teacher from Afton makes the trip to Como every week to help prune, wire, clean and repot Como's collection of more than 130 trees, which range from traditional Japanese maples and junipers, to Ponderosa pines from the Rocky Mountains and Tamarack from Minnesota's north shore. The wide variety of species, sizes and characteristics of Como's bonsai allows Kos to select the trees that are blooming or look the best at a given moment for public display in The Ordway Gardens wing. While Como's outdoor gardens lie dormant, winter is a great time to discover the beauty of bonsai, with a few of Kos' and Hedberg's insider tips.

**Leaning In:** Bonsai trunks often tip toward the observer, a visual trick that draws viewers into the miniature world bonsai masters are trying to create. But leaning in is not a requirement. "Once you learn all the rules of bonsai, you discover that some of the most beautiful trees break them all," says Hedberg.

**Asian Roots:** Bonsai has roots that go back to China in 700 AD where crafting elegant potted trees or "pun-sai" was only for the elite. By the 1200s, bonsai had become a mainstay of Japanese horticulture, spreading through Europe and the West by the late 19th century. As a result, every culture has a certain style, says Hedberg, from the more densely "helmeted" trees you might see in a European collection, to the airier American style influenced by California bonsai master John Yoshio Naka, who believed branches must "leave room for the birds to fly through." No matter where they come from, Kos says, bonsai are typically planted in a soilless mixture of pumice, lava rock, and akadama, granular clay-like material mined from the volcanic soil near Japan's Mount Fuji.

**Bonsai Styles:** Como's collection includes a wide range of bonsai styles and plant materials, like the Ponderosa pine featured at left. Each inset also features a distinct aesthetic style: from left, the Trident Maple with an S-shaped trunk is trained in the informal upright style (*Moyogi*); the Japanese Greybark Elm are arranged in a forest style (*Yose-ue*); the White Cedar represents the formal upright style (*Chokkan*); and the Chinese Elm features a semi-cascading style (*Han-kengai*), with branches that drop below the top of the pot.

**Artificial Aging:** Some of Como's bonsai are more than 450 years old, but many more are just trained to look that way, with winding trunks and flaring root systems (*Nebari*) that make the tree look like it's survived the elements. "Age is an important part of the aesthetic," says Hedberg. "If you can make a 20-year-old tree look like it's 200 years old, that's a successful bonsai."





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### Cozy & Content

When the forecast calls for another day indoors, Garden Safari Gifts is the place to stock your family's winter survival kit. From engaging puzzles and art projects, to coffee mugs and fuzzy slippers, Como Friends' gift shop has all you need to stay cozy and content this season. **As a Como Friends member, enjoy 15 percent off every purchase at Garden Safari Gifts, while supporting the plants and animals you love!**



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