



como friends  
THRIVE ON

Fall 2024 | Volume 26 | Number 4

# INSIDER

Career Development  
@ Como  
*Como's Nature Walk teen  
volunteers help make  
conservation cool*

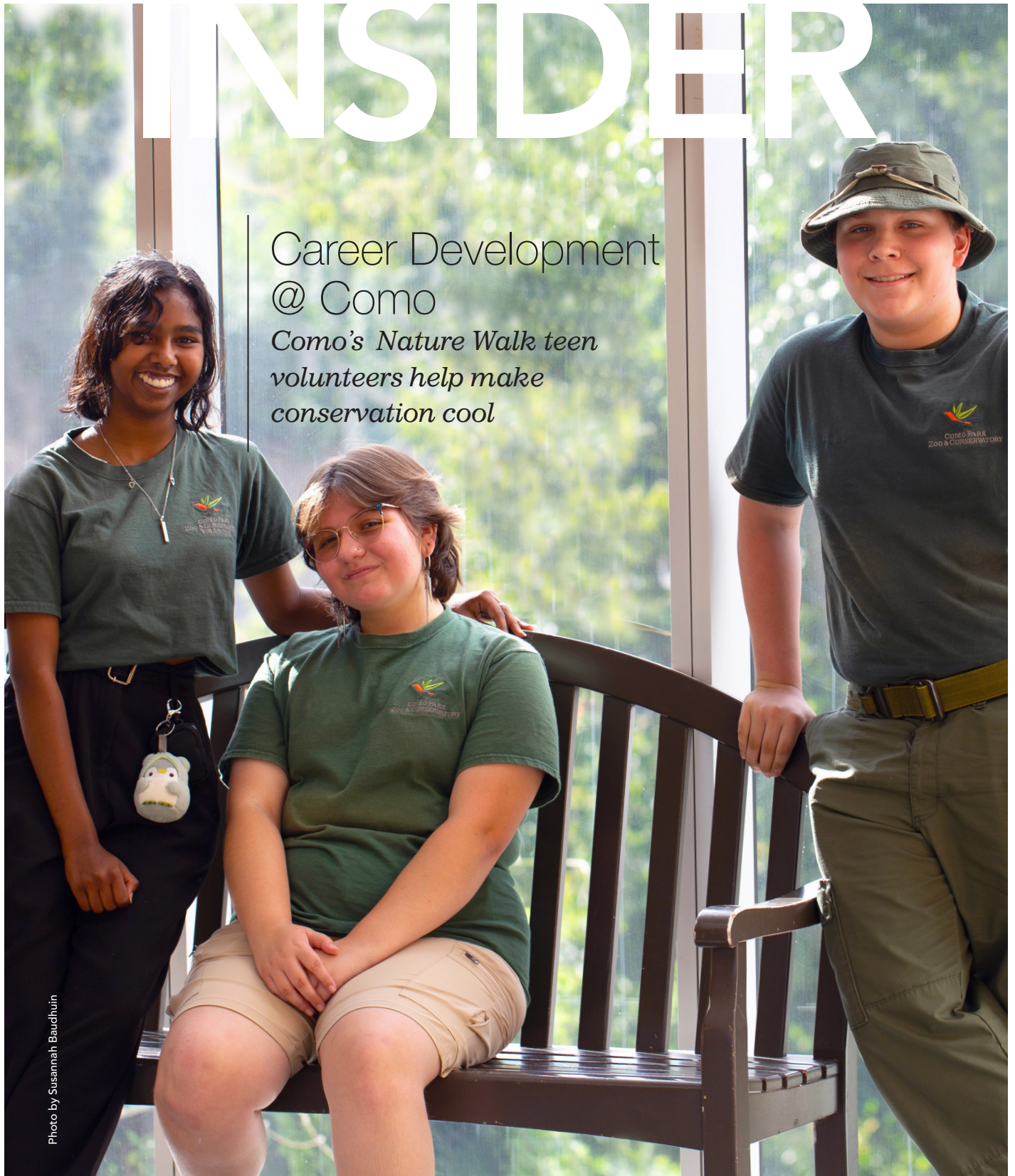


Photo by Susannah Baudhuin

| Como Park Zoo & Conservatory's Nature Walk team rounds out another successful summer of guest engagement! |

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## HOW TO REACH US

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### COMO PARK ZOO & CONSERVATORY

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



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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### COMO FRIENDS INSIDER

Art Direction & Design: Susannah Baudhuin  
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## COMO NEWS & EVENTS



### THANK YOU TO OUR SUNSET AFFAIR PARTNERS AND SPONSORS

Glorious summer weather and a generous community of donors helped Sunset Affair: Our Wild World exceed all expectations, raising funds from the event's fantastic silent auction and Fund-a-Mission drive, while securing a generous \$50,000 match from our partners at the Manitou Fund.

A special thank you to the entire staff at Como, our Sunset Affair Committee and Honorary Chairs, Nancy and Todd Koch, and to the many generous sponsors and donors who continue to make Como Friends' summer gala a can't-miss event: McGough, Travelers, UBS, Best Buy, Xcel Energy, Hubbard Broadcasting Foundation, Old National Bank, Lube-Tech, Stinson LLP, U.S. Bank, Dolan Printing, D'Amico Catering, Gunderson's Jewelers, Natural Habitat Adventures, and Bartlett Tree Experts.



THIS FALL, TAKE YOUR PICK FROM TWO FUN-FILLED EXPERIENTIAL EVENTS TO BENEFIT COMO PARK ZOO & CONSERVATORY:



### Wild Conservation at Como

Thursday, September 19 | 6:30 pm – 8:30 pm

This after-hours, adults-only fundraising event gives guests a VIP feel, with an interactive scavenger hunt, a cash bar, and cool encounters with animals, plants and people. Purchase a Wild Conservation Plus ticket for an additional \$20 to gain exclusive access to the Aquatics Building for the first hour of the event and chat with a Como zoo-keeper about what it takes to keep our diverse aquatic animals thriving every day. If the penguins are feeling sociable, you'll even have the chance to visit with one of them out and about in the building!



### Como Quest

Sunday, September 29 | 9:00 am – 11:30 am

A family-friendly fundraiser made for multigenerational fun, Como Quest is a wild exploration for Como lovers of all ages. With an interactive scavenger hunt app and an adventurous spirit, your team of treasure hunters will dig deep into Como's amazing animal and plant collections. Purchase a Como Quest Plus ticket for an additional \$15 so you and your family can come early to see how the animals of Tropical Encounters get ready for their day! Learn more about how the tortoises and turtles get fed and find out how Chloe the sloth starts her morning.

Additional information on each event and links to purchase tickets can be found on the Como Friends website at [comofriends.org/events](http://comofriends.org/events).



## GIVE TO THE MAX DAY NOVEMBER 21, 2024

Through exceptional animal care and thoughtful plant cultivation, Como Park Zoo & Conservatory keeps conservation at the forefront of education programming, staff development, and visitor amenities. Support from people like you also protects Como's commitment to free admission, making sure that every visitor feels included and welcome at Minnesota's most visited cultural destination.

As we look ahead to Give to the Max Day, we look forward to sharing how your support helps Como thrive. Whether it's welcoming schools for free field trips or providing the funding for cool conservation projects like Como Zoo's new Bison Savanna (see page 8), your support elevates and enriches what's possible at Como.

**Mark your calendars for Minnesota's great day of giving coming November 21. Watch your inbox and be sure to follow us on Facebook and LinkedIn to learn more about how your support is critical to Como Park Zoo & Conservatory.**



## LEAVE A LEGACY

Keep the Como tradition growing strong for the next generation by making a planned gift to Como Friends. Your support will help safeguard free admission for Como visitors and provide the best care for its wild and precious animals and plants. Help Como Park Zoo & Conservatory be the best it can be today, and even better tomorrow. Owned by all, enjoyed by all, and free to all.

**For more information on planned giving, contact Laurel Lundberg, Director of Individual Giving, at [laurel.lundberg@comofriends.org](mailto:laurel.lundberg@comofriends.org) or call 651.487.8296.**



## A GIFT SHOP THAT GIVES BACK

Como insiders know that Garden Safari Gifts is the place to go if you're looking for that perfect Sparky t-shirt, puzzles and games for kids, and plush animals in the shape of nearly every species on the planet.

What you might not know is that every year, funding from Garden Safari Gifts supports programs, inclusivity and improvements at Como Park Zoo & Conservatory. Gift shop proceeds, paired with philanthropic gifts from individuals, corporations, and foundations have helped Como Friends to secure more than \$50 million since 2000, all to benefit Minnesota's most visited cultural institution.

"The retail operation at Garden Safari Gifts has always been a big part of our business model at Como Friends, and its success is one of the reasons that Como Park Zoo & Conservatory continues to be free to visitors," says Como Friends President Jackie Sticha. "Not only is it fun to shop there, but when you do, you're helping to support the things that make Como so special."

While small retail shops have been part of Como's campus for years, Garden Safari Gifts was originally opened in 2005 as part of the Visitor Center expansion, with satellite shops later launched at Como Town, Gorilla Forest, and Polar Bear Odyssey during the busy summer months. "Consistent profits, especially in the early years, were important to establishing Como Friends as a strong nonprofit," says Terri Scheunemann, Como Friends' director of retail operations.

From the start, Como souvenirs and animal-themed gifts have been big sellers with visitors. But more recently, Garden Safari Gifts has curated a collection of more sustainably sourced and conservation-minded gifts, from beeswax food wrappers, to bags and bedspreads made from recycled cloth, and reusable straws and water bottles to help cut down on single-use plastics. "Supporting Como's conservation mission has definitely been a growing part of our marketing plan, and our visitors seem to really like it," says Sheila Wewers, Como Friends' associate director of retail operations.

While most items at Garden Safari Gifts sell for less than \$25, every purchase you make there has had a powerful impact at Como, investing in everything from cutting-edge animal care, to accessible education programs, to gorgeous public gardens. "Simply making the decision to shop at Garden Safari Gifts can help make great things happen at Como," says Sticha. "Whether you make direct donations or shop with us, it's all part of the community support that Como depends on."

**Remember, Como Friends members always enjoy 15 percent off every purchase at Garden Safari Gifts. Watch your Como Promo newsletter this season for news about special member discounts and holiday deals coming soon!**

# CAREER DEVELOPMENT @ COMO

Como's Nature Walk teen volunteers help make conservation cool

# BUILDING A NEW CAREER PATH TO COMO



Wally Hlavac, a conservation biology major at the University of Minnesota, spent his summer traipsing across Madagascar, doing field surveys of the island's birds, butterflies, and lemurs. He credits his time as a Como Nature Walk volunteer with helping him take the first step.

Hlavac was a summer camper at Como when he encountered his first Nature Walk volunteer, one of 50-some teens recruited each spring and summer to help bring Como's animal and plant collections a little closer to visitors. "He came in to show us a rabbit, and I decided that was something I really wanted to do, too," says Hlavac, who was accepted into the selective program when he was in ninth grade.

Nature Walk teens are trained on a variety of Como's conservation themes, from the rainforest and reptiles, to beneficial bugs and plants, that they go on to share with Como visitors at interpretive stations arrayed around campus. "It was the first time in my life that I got to teach people about conservation and concepts that I'm really passionate about," Hlavac says.

The program, which includes professional development

training, also pushed him to develop greater confidence and public speaking skills. "I was a really awkward kid, but being able to go to Como and talk to people, and answer their questions was really great for me," he says. "It motivated me to try hard, and get Como visitors engaged, because those encounters felt really good." Each year, in fact, Nature Walk volunteers connect with an estimated 250,000 visitors, most of them younger children, role modeling the ways that caring about conservation is cool.

After a pause during the pandemic, Nature Walk was back at full power this summer, with a full complement of teen volunteers sharing their insights on the smallest insects and the tallest giraffes. While not every teen will go on to pursue careers in conservation, Hlavac says there's no doubt the experience helped him recognize that protecting the natural world could be his calling.

*"I think the overall curriculum of Nature Walk really does inspire a love for natural science in any capacity, and learning more about animals and plants and being able to share that with people was really exciting," he says. "I know it really cemented conservation in my mind as something I want to continue doing."*

How do you get a 1,000 pound animal to move the direction you want it to go? For Como Zoo apprentice Sophia Dady, the trick is building trust with Ruby, the newest bison to live in Como's historic barn. Over the course of the last year, Dady's calm demeanor (and hundreds of carrots) have helped her to build a bond with the young bison, teaching her to follow a training target. This new husbandry skill now allows keepers to get a closer look at different parts of Ruby's body, depending on where the target is positioned.

While few zoo interns ever get the chance to take on an important long-term project, animal training is all in a day's work for Dady. A member of St. Paul's Right Track apprentice program, Dady is one of 9 zookeeping and 4 horticultural apprentices at Como this year, earning 20- to 40-hours-a-week pay while they take on entry-level responsibilities throughout Como Zoo and the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory.

Though unpaid internships and volunteer conservation gigs have often been the career path to jobs in an-

imal care, the Right Track program helps to remove the economic barriers to participation for youth from cost-burdened households. "Right Track is designed to ensure that you don't have to work without pay, or have multiple side jobs, to take advantage of a career-building opportunity," says Lianna Sanders, the Como project manager who oversees the Right Track apprentices.

Being fully immersed in animal care at Como has allowed Dady to take part in everything from primate training to observing behind-the-scenes veterinary care, while also attending Right Track support classes in resume writing, financial literacy, and more.

"Because the zookeepers see you more often, they trust you and allow you to take on your own projects, which is so important," Dady says. "You're given a bit more independence to find out what you like to do and what you're good at, which is important as you're developing your career."

This year, your support for Como Friends made it possible to invest in Como's Nature Walk program with the newly funded assistant role, Maddie Becker (pictured at the far left). "Working with Nature Walk has been a fantastic experience. The kids have worked hard this summer, and it's been so uplifting to help foster an environment where they've not only been so welcoming and enthusiastic with the guests that visit their carts, but also in their relationships with each other. Each day they express so much joy for life and the natural world that I am left with nothing but immense hope for our future."



RightTrack apprentices earn a living wage while working in a variety of roles at Como. Additional funding from Como Friends helps apprentices purchase uniforms, heavy work boots, and other tools to be successful and safe on the job.



# REPLANTING THE RANGE

*Native plantings in Como Zoo's bison habitat are helping teach visitors about one of Minnesota's lost habitats*

More than 200 years ago, when bison herds roamed what's now Minnesota, they thrived in an ecosystem known as the oak savanna. Forged in the wake of fires both from lightning and human hands, these habitats featured diverse flowering plants, rich grasses and bur oaks that often formed the borders between the western prairies and the forests of the east. Though roughly 10 percent of Minnesota was once oak savanna, agriculture and other development reduced it to one of the rarest ecosystems on the planet.

Bringing attention to the plants that once populated the savanna—as well as the role bison may play in reawakening this unique ecosystem—is now the goal of a new partnership between hoofstock keepers at Como Zoo and horticulturists at the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory.

“The idea behind this Bison Savanna Project was to find a way to represent a habitat that is almost gone from Minnesota, along with the species that was central to that ecosystem,” says Hoofstock Zookeeper Aaron Nelson. “We wanted to marry these two conservation stories, bison and oak savanna, together in the same space.”



The seeds of the project started last year, when Como Zoo expanded its bison habitat to make way for Ruby, a yearling from the Minnesota Bison Conservation Herd, a joint project of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and the Minnesota Zoo. Funding from Como Friends' Conservation Champions program allowed the Zoo and the Conservatory to team up on creating a new landscaping approach to the habitat, featuring grasses like little blue-stem and prairie dropseed as well as forbs like blazing stars, purple prairie clover and asters, and other plants that would be native to the oak savanna. In August, Como's bison herd



Previous page: Horticulturists Rylee and Bryn, and Zookeeper Aaron; Ruby the Bison; Como Volunteer (plants: sideoats grama and prairie clover)  
Above: Horticulturist Rylee; Bisons Bogo and Ruby; RightTrack horticulture team: Adora, Nora and Elise with Marjorie McNeely Conservatory Gardeners Jake and John (plants: bluestem, blazing star and tickseed)



made way for a team of horticulturists, apprentices and volunteers who spent about two days planting more than 600 sustainable perennials along the edge of the bison habitat. A smaller public garden bed next to the bison features similar plantings as well as a bur oak at the center.

As the garden fills in, plants will provide more visual interest for visitors and a more engaging environment for bison. "A lot of these plants are used to being grazed—as we've seen with

the rabbits that are already munching on them," says Horticulturist Rylee Werden. "But many of these plants will also attract the kinds of insects and pollinators that we weren't seeing in this yard when it was just grass."

Creating habitats that better reflect the wild and natural surroundings of Como's animals has been a campus theme for more than a decade. For instance, Polar Bear Odyssey's landscape design was inspired by the Hudson Bay tundra, while Como Harbor was built to resemble the

Pacific coastline. But as Senior Horticulturist Bryn Fleming points out, what's special about the Bison Savanna Project is that it tells the story of a natural ecosystem much closer to home.

"Any time we can connect the dots between animals, plants and humans is just really important," she says. "It gets visitors thinking about what was here before us, who was here before us, and how Indigenous people interacted with the ecosystem, too."

As it grows, the beauty of the natural savanna may also inspire Como visitors to think about bringing more native plants to their own backyards. "I think sometimes people hear the word 'native plant' and think, 'maybe that's not really my aesthetic,' but I'm hoping this will be a space where people will see individual species and consider them as ornamental, too," she says. "They're easy to care for, they're good for the ecosystem, and they've evolved here with our environment."



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### Gift Shop Staff Favorites

From oversized plush and tiny collectible figurines, to elegant ramen bowls and locally-made Knudsen's caramels, find just the right thing to bring home from your day at Como with help from the friendly staff at Garden Safari Gifts. Ask for their inside tips on the coolest socks, stickers and best plush animals on your next visit! **Proceeds support the animals and plants you love, and Como Friends members enjoy 15 percent off every purchase.**

