



como friends
THRIVE ON

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INSIDER

A Walk Through Time
As she prepares to retire this year, President Jackie Sticha looks back on 25 years with Como Friends

Photo by Susannah Baudhuin

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HOW TO REACH US

Como Friends: 651.487.8229
Membership & Donations: 651.487.8229
Garden Safari Gifts: 651.487.8222

Como Park Zoo & Conservatory Information: 651.487.8200
Visitor Services: 651.487.8201
Education Department: 651.487.8272
Volunteer Services: 651.487.8252
Rentals: 651.487.8250

COMO PARK ZOO & CONSERVATORY

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



1225 Estabrook Drive | St. Paul, MN 55103 | 651.487.8229
www.comofriends.org | comomembership@comofriends.org



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 & CONSERVATORY

1225 Estabrook Drive | St. Paul, MN 55103
www.comozooconservatory.org

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.



DIRECTOR OF PARKS AND RECREATION: Andy Rodriguez

COMO FRIENDS INSIDER

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Editor: Laura Billings Coleman | Printing: Dolan Printing

COMO NEWS & EVENTS



COMO AFTER HOURS
Tuesday, May 20, 2025 | 6:30 PM – 8:30 PM

Spend a balmy spring night exploring Como—without the crowds or the kids—at Como Friends' adults-only fundraising event coming May 20. With a cash bar and cool animals, plants and people, Como After Hours is a casual night of grown-up fun for a great cause. Purchase your tickets today at comofriends.org/events or scan the QR Code above!



Save the date for next year's Bouquets on
THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2026



SUNSET AFFAIR
Thursday, July 17, 2025 | 5:30 PM – 10:00 PM

Mark your calendars to join us on Thursday, July 17 for Como Friends' Sunset Affair, a vibrant summer gala that celebrates Como and supports this beloved community treasure. Inspired by nature's palette, the evening will include colorful conversations with Como's zookeepers and horticulturists, fascinating plants and animals, and an amazing silent auction. Watch your inbox for our announcement of live ticket sales, coming in May.

RAISING A GLASS TO BOUQUETS

A special thank you to the guests, vendors, volunteers, and Como Park Zoo and Conservatory staff who helped make Como Friends' Bouquets fundraiser a fantastic success in February. From the lush and gorgeous gardens that greeted our 450 guests, to the extraordinary wine, beer, nonalcoholic beverages, and food made possible by our generous community of local purveyors, Bouquets lived up to its billing as Como Friends' most spirited fundraiser.

Thank you Sponsors and Partners!





DO MORE THIS SPRING AS A COMO FRIENDS MEMBER

As vacation travel season gears up, be sure to pack your Como Friends membership card. Your support opens the doors to free or reduced admission at hundreds of the country’s most exceptional zoos and botanical gardens. And when you join at the Connector level and above, you’ll have access to more than 1,000 members of the North American Reciprocal Museum Association, too.

Your membership also entitles you to 15 percent off every purchase at Garden Safari Gifts, and a tuition discount to Como’s great education programs and summer camps.

“Cynthia and I have been Horace Cleveland Society members for ten years—ever since I retired from the zoo after almost 30 years,” says former zookeeper Pete Lee. “There have been so many benefits—including the North American Reciprocal card. We call it the gold card—on a recent trip to New Mexico we received some 400 dollars worth of admissions to zoos & gardens, museums, and historic sites.”

Renew your membership at comofriends.org or by calling Individual Giving Manager Kate Aksadi at 651-487-8264.



LEAVE A LEGACY BY SUPPORTING COMO’S FUTURE

A Minnesota tradition for more than 125 years, coming to Como Park Zoo & Conservatory is a memory that connects across generations. Help make history this year by making a planned gift to support the animals, plants and people that connect every day of the year at Minnesota’s most visited cultural destination.

For more information on planned giving, contact Laurel Lundberg, Director of Individual Giving at laurel.lundberg@comofriends.org or 651-487-8296.

MEET RAY WATSON

The Marjorie McNeely Conservatory’s new horticultural curator is a great believer in the power of plants

Since taking on the role as curator at the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory, Ray Watson has been impressed by just how passionate Como’s horticulturists are about the plants in their care.

“Within my first week here, every staff member I met apologized for gushing and going on about what they’re interested in, whether that’s staghorn ferns, or carnivorous plants, or orchids,” Watson says. “That enthusiasm is why the plants here are so beautiful and well cared for, and I think the passion that people who work here have for plants evokes something in visitors as well.”

A graduate of Swarthmore College, Watson earned a double major in religious studies and biology, where their research focused on hormones and mating behavior in forked fungus beetles. In graduate school at the University of Virginia, Watson earned a master’s degree in Ecology and Evolution, diving deep into the genetic evolution of domesticated sunflowers. Watson also served as a visiting scholar at the University of California, Berkeley and worked as an educator with the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History’s Youth Engagement through Science program, writing curriculum as well as collecting and managing research populations of teaching specimens.

While Watson is impressed by the depth and breadth of the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory’s horticultural collections, they are looking forward to finding even more ways to teach the public about the powerful connections between animals, people, and plants, particularly the species that are native to our region. “With my background as a field biologist I really like



the idea of expanding, and thoughtfully integrating, our conservation work into the gardens and the design of the Conservatory’s strategic plans,” Watson says. “And I would really like to see us incorporate native plantings as much as possible, not just into our outside spaces, but also into our indoor and display gardens.”

“The Marjorie McNeely Conservatory is really fortunate to have found someone with Ray’s unique mix of skills and interests, from field conservation, to curriculum writing, to greenhouse operations,” says Como Friends’ President Jackie Sticha. “Their perspective will definitely help strengthen and grow the plant collections at Como, and how those resources connect visitors to our conservation mission.”

Nearly every day, Como Friends President Jackie Sticha takes a walk around the grounds of Como Park Zoo and Conservatory, but those first bright days of spring are always her favorites. “There’s really nothing like being at Como on a beautiful, busy day, with thousands of people of all backgrounds and ages, tourists and teenagers, senior citizens, families, and kids on field trips,” she says. “I often overhear conversations that are quite inspiring, or that make me chuckle. And I love the way the whole place buzzes with energy.”

The long-tenured president of Como Friends, Sticha can claim credit for a lot of that buzz. Since the organization’s founding in 2000, she’s led annual fundraising strategy, advocacy initiatives, and three successful capital campaigns that have contributed \$52 million in new funding for the historic Como Zoo and the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory and leveraged an additional \$50 million in state funds made possible through Como Friends’ advocacy work. These funds have had a big impact, creating new classroom space that serves thousands of students every year; unveiling cutting-edge habitats like Como Harbor, Polar Bear Odyssey and

A WALK THROUGH TIME



As she prepares to retire this year, President Jackie Sticha looks back on 25 years with Como Friends

The Ordway Gardens; and supporting free admission so everyone has access to the wonders of the living world.

But 25 years ago, as an early hire of the newly formed Como Zoo and Conservatory Society, a merger of four different nonprofits and docent groups, Sticha’s first job was figuring out how to establish a strong public/private partnership that could protect the future of one of the Twin Cities’ most beloved institutions. “With 100 years of history, nearly everyone has a memory of coming to Como as a child, with their children, with their grandchildren,” she says. “Another strength was the passion and knowledge and commitment of the Zoo and Conservatory staff, and their vision for what could make Como even better.”

With strong support from the city and its parks department, an engaged board of directors, and such visionary volunteer leaders as Leonard Wilkening, Arlene Scheunemann, Bob Piram and Paul Verret, the Society (renamed Como Friends in 2008) launched a major capital campaign to unite the Zoo and Conservatory through the Visitor Center, and to provide much-needed updates to the historic campus with new spaces for animal support, plant collections and administration. “What drew me is that this was a brand new organization with some really big ideas,” she says. “We all had to build new relationships to move forward, and while we definitely made mistakes along the way, it was often out of an excess of enthusiasm for what was possible.”

During the most challenging times, Como Friends’ first board chair, the late Leonard Wilkening, would give Sticha this advice: “Just give it five years, and it will

all work out.” His timeline was prophetic—within the first five years of their partnership, Como Friends and Como Park Zoo and Conservatory unveiled the new Visitor Center, Tropical Encounters, the new Fern Room and the first-ever Orchid House to the public, with behind-the-scenes improvements that included a new Animal Support Building and administrative offices retrofitted in Como Zoo’s iconic WPA-era building. “As we all began working together, we started having more and more success,” Sticha says. “But unveiling the Visitor Center was the real turning point, because it was the first visual demonstration of what the future at Como would look like.”

Since then, Como Friends has led the charge on two additional capital campaigns, one for Como Harbor, and another to create Polar Bear Odyssey and The Ordway Gardens. Como Friends also secured the major gift that renamed the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory, and a \$1 million endowment to create a permanent source of support for the Charlotte Partridge Ordway Japanese Garden.

During Sticha’s tenure, Como Friends finished each fiscal year with an operating surplus and increased the annual contribution to Como Park Zoo and Conservatory. Como Friends’ steady growth provided stability, creating a dependable source for Como’s annual operations and ongoing improvements.

When public funding for Gorilla Forest was threatened, Como Friends expanded its profile to include advocacy work, joining Como each legislative season to support the campus’s role as both a community asset and an economic pow-

Sunbittern and bison photos by Jackie, from one of her many afternoon walks.



erhouse that welcomes nearly two million visitors each year—the largest audience for any cultural institution in the state. Como Friends also successfully diversified its revenue streams with a mix of popular fundraising events like Bouquets, Sunset Affair, and Como After Hours; strong relationships with foundations and corporate funders; growing individual giving programs; and a successful gift shop operation, Garden Safari Gifts. “We’ve grown and learned a lot since our early years, but we’re still a relatively small team for the amount of money we raise, and for the extensive retail operation that we have, but we have a smart and nimble staff who are so innovative and creative in coming up with solutions for how we can be successful, and working together to execute them.” Sticha says.

As she looks ahead to retirement this summer, Sticha says many of her favorite memories were made learning from supporters energized by their love of plants and animals, and working with families who have passed their commitment to Como from one generation to the next. She also thinks often of community leaders like Wilkening, the late Nancy Nelson, who

raised funds for the Polar Bear Odyssey campaign with her husband Russ, fundraising consultant Jim Scarpetta, and others who were instrumental in making Como Friends’ vision a reality. “Every time we finish a new project, I think how pleased they would be to see how much progress Como has made.” She also thinks about some of her favorite animal ambassadors, including the late Amanda the orangutan, who once spiced up a behind-the-scenes tour by spitting a mouthful of water and orangutan kibble in Sticha’s direction. “Orangutans can hold a lot of water in their mouths, so it was like walking into a lake,” she laughs. “But I wasn’t offended at all. I felt like she’d chosen me.”

As Como Friends looks ahead to announcing the appointment of its next leader, she has some advice for her successor: “Have fun. Being at a job for 25 years is a long time to be in one place, but I’ve never been bored because Como is so dynamic, with living animals and gardens that are always changing and evolving. Between our staff, our board, and our donors, there are so many wonderful people connected to Como and it’s fun working with them, and working together for something that is so meaningful to our community.”



Charlotte Partridge Ordway Japanese Garden Enhances Accessibility with Recent Improvements

The best gifts are the ones that keep giving, and a few offerings have fostered more goodwill than the Charlotte Partridge Ordway Japanese Garden. A focal point at Como for nearly five decades this san-sui style garden was designed to celebrate the sister-city relationship—now 70 years old—between Nagasaki and Saint Paul. Your support for Como Friends has been critical to keeping Como’s Japanese Garden thriving across generations, from establishing a dedicated endowment fund for its support, to creating a new entry point through The Ordway Gardens wing, inviting a whole new generation to discover this horticultural gem.

NEW PATHWAYS: This spring, construction crews are putting the finishing touches on newly paved paths made possible by a gift from long-time donors of Como Friends. “Regulars will remember that the pathways were made from a silvery gray rock called dresser trap, that would often wash out into garden beds or become really deep in some areas, or muddy and soft in others,” says Senior Horticulturist Ariel Dressler. “It was beginning to be an accessibility issue for some folks, so having the new paths this season will be a welcome improvement.” While the paths are new, visual guideposts like the lanterns from the 1904 World’s Fair are always a constant.

SPRUCING UP: “One thing that visitors always notice is the meticulously pruned shrubs and trees, which

are a signature of a Japanese garden,” says Dressler. Support from Como Friends has helped to train Como’s horticultural staff on the specialized aesthetic demands of this style of gardening through regular consultations with Japanese garden expert John Powell. This season, horticulturists are planning to incorporate new species of trees into the periphery of the garden, building a natural buffer between the garden and golf course as the plants grow. What most excites Ray Watson as the new horticulture curator, is the opportunity to increase the biodiversity of the space. “I often think there is the idea that formal gardens are not as compatible with conservation—I am thrilled we are thoughtfully incorporating the space into our broader conservation strategies.”

PERENNIAL FAVORITE: One of the favorite projects for Como Friends’ outgoing president, Jackie Sticha, the Charlotte Partridge Ordway Japanese Garden reflects some of the things she values most about Como and its community. “This corner of Como has such a colorful history of collaboration, of volunteers, gardeners, and donors coming together here, and in Japan to create something beautiful that’s lasted for generations,” she says. “It’s so beautiful and peaceful. I enjoy a slow walk through to catch my breath on a busy day. The fact that this garden is now recognized as a rising star of the Japanese garden tradition is something this whole community can feel proud of.”



When she shares observations about the polar bears in her care, Senior Keeper Allison Jungheim can sound like she's talking about her closest friends, bubbling about Nan's bossy behavior, bragging about Kulu's impressive weight gain—"At 940 pounds, we should probably stop calling him little Kulu"—and beaming at Neil, the mild-mannered male who first came to Como Zoo with his brother Buzz back in 2001. "He is my bear," she says.

Jungheim brings the same enthusiasm to her role as studbook keeper for North America's polar bears, responsible for tracking the genetic health and history of some 60 individuals living in partner zoos across Canada and the U.S. A project monitored by the Bear Taxon Advisory Group through the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, the studbook is one of the ways that zoos work together to ensure that managed populations of polar bears are living their best lives.

Similar to your family's own electronic medical records that allow for more coordinated health care, "keeping all of that data in one place is super important for the longevity of animals," Jungheim says. "The studbook also gives me the ability to look back at historic animals and current animals, to see who's related to whom, and who should breed with whom."



Funding from Como Friends enabled Allison Jungheim to travel to attend an in-person polar bear conference, strengthening the network of connections zoos rely on to promote best practice husbandry for polar bears and other vulnerable species.

PROTECTING POLAR BEARS

As studbook keeper for polar bears, Allison Jungheim preserves the health and genetics of North America's most majestic species

While Como Zoo's keepers have earned national recognition for their success at reducing polar bear repetitive behaviors and developing tools for improving polar bear blood draws, Jungheim's longtime leadership in polar bear preservation is a volunteer effort. "I don't get any extra money or funding for managing the polar bear studbook, but it's worth it to be part of the bigger picture, helping polar bears around the country, and not just here at Como."

Polar bears require just the right conditions for successful breeding, both in zoos and in the wild. While polar bears will typically mate in early spring, they're one of more than 130 animal species with delayed implantation, meaning that fertilized eggs don't implant in the uterus until months later. The delay allows females to build up the fat reserves they'll need to support themselves and their cubs during a long denning period. "But if the female doesn't gain enough weight, or have good enough body condition, she may not implant that embryo or embryos at all," explains Jungheim. The long dormancy period means that if one breeding pair is unsuccessful, zoos don't have much time to establish a new pairing.

"That's one reason why collaboration with other zoos is so important," Jungheim says, noting that the polar bear community of keepers, managers, and vet staff have regular virtual meetings throughout the year, sharing breeding and denning news, and exploring new strategies. "One of the things we're trying is to create more choice for mates by pairing more than just one male and one female," she says. "Our thought is that by giving mate choice, it gives the male the chance to share the love with other females, and increases competition for breeding, and hopefully, increases success rates."

With that strategy in mind, Como Zoo is planning to bring a possible breeding partner for Kulu later this season. "With an aging population of bears, we're trying to shake things up," Jungheim says. If the pairing works, she may even have a couple of new names to add to the polar bear studbook.

Come see Como Zoo's polar bears during PARTY FOR THE PLANET, APRIL 26-27, presented by Xcel Energy. Como's annual Earth Day celebration is all about supporting the conservation benefits of renewable energy.





1225 Estabrook Drive
Saint Paul, MN 55103

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All The Buzz

Bees are big this season at Garden Safari Gifts, which is buzzing with cool products made for and from pollinators. From pollinator-friendly wildflower seeds to honey-based teas and treats to make life a little sweeter, our shop is blooming with great gift ideas this spring. **Remember, Como Friends members enjoy 15 percent off every purchase to benefit the gorgeous gardens and fragrant flowers now on display at Como Park Zoo and Conservatory.**

