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## LEARNING HAS NO AGE LIMIT

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By Shannon Block, President/CEO

I have always believed in the power of collaboration and higher learning. Early in my professional career, I realized that you can't develop all the skills and knowledge you need fast enough on your own. Henry Ford once said, "If everyone is moving forward together, then success takes care of itself." And, the beauty of learning is that there is no age limit.

Denver Zoo provides countless learning opportunities for young minds, minds like little sponges that soak up information with a thirst for more. We are proud of our educational programs that target students who may not otherwise have the opportunity to explore and learn from their surroundings.

But the Zoo also offers an incredible adult higher education program as well. This week, I am proud to announce the inaugural graduating class of Denver Zoo's Advanced Inquiry Program (AIP). This is an inquiry-driven learning experience allowing participants to take graduate-level courses in-person and online from our conservation education staff at Denver Zoo, and online from Miami University faculty. The program is designed to connect participants to a broad network of educators, conservationists and community leaders.



with Miami University, located in Oxford, Ohio, to launch AIP as part of the University's Project *Dragonfly*. Miami

University consistently ranks among the nation's top public universities for the quality of teaching and overall student experience. Bring a prestigious university and a renowned zoo together and the results can't be anything but outstanding. So, that's what we did. In fact, currently, we are one of only eight Associations of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) accredited zoos in the country that has this program. Other AZA zoos plan to implement this program in the near future.

I want to emphasize that this is a true master's degree program, with all of the rigorous coursework and requirements of any other graduate-level degree. Participants take 21 credit hours at Denver Zoo and 14 credit hours on online through Miami University. Students also complete a Master's Plan, which is equivalent to a thesis. Depending upon coursework, graduates receive either a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) in the Biological Sciences or a Master of Arts in Biology, both conferred by Miami University.

So besides the relationship between Denver Zoo and Miami, where does the collaboration part come in? Easy, it is the basis of the program. Inquiry learning is not a phrase people use on a daily basis, however it is a buzz word in the formal education world. Though people may not know it, they engage in inquiry learning every day. It is observing the world around you, asking questions and doing the investigations to seek the answers to what you want to know. Students rely upon each other for an exchange of information and collaboration as they work toward their goal.

One thing we didn't anticipate is that the students would become a resource for us. Students have contributed directly to our conservation work in the field, becoming an asset and a resource. It is a true reciprocal relationship—students get real-world application and Denver Zoo benefits from their research.

Students come from a variety of backgrounds, ages and professions. This program proves that there is no stereotype of learner. I am pleased that six of the recent graduates are part of our Denver Zoo family: Heather Batts, Colby McElrath, Brittney Weaver, Ali Young and Zoo volunteers, Sharon Garrison and Sara Shanahan. Each of these students has their own experiences and reasons for embarking upon this journey, below are just a few.

Ali Young, was a banker with a love for animals. As a child she wanted to become a veterinarian, but her career path took a turn and she pursued banking instead. Though successful as a banker, her passion for animals continued to pull at her. When she discovered the AIP, she immediately applied and never looked back. In fact, she has joined our staff as the animal care office manager.

Heather Batts knew she wanted to be involved in conservation. Her path never wavered. She entered the program and has become immersed in conservation work as an intern in the Zoo's Conservation Biology program. Because of the connections and knowledge she gained from AIP, she can envision an exciting future with endless opportunities.

This program attracts students outside of the Zoo, too. The chief park ranger for Boulder County Parks and Open Space wanted to add an education component to complement his emergency response training. Not only is he keeping park visitors safe, he is teaching them the importance of conservation.

I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge all of the Zoo staff who dedicate time and resources to help facilitate the program. A special shout out goes to Molly Maloy who serves as the AIP coordinator. She is also the Zoo's conservation education co-lead in Botswana, so she can bring her own experience to enrich the curriculum. Alicia Lamfers, the science inquiry programs coordinator, plays an important role in the AIP success.

We must all remember that we are never too old to learn and follow our passion. Adult students are using this program to either make an impact or change their professional life, finding a new identity in their community and finally having a platform to follow that passion. It is changing peoples' lives, changing the Denver Zoo community and, most importantly, reaching those beyond our gates.

I want to finish with a quote that I find very insightful.

"A man's reach should exceed his grasp." These are words from a poem by Robert Browning that suggest that, to achieve anything worthwhile, you need to attempt to do it.

Sometimes things work out, sometimes they don't. But the important thing is to step out of your comfort zone, listen to your gut and jump in. That is how people make a difference in our world.

Congratulations graduates, we are proud of you!

