



Betty White's Zoo Pals

FOR MORE THAN FIFTY YEARS, Betty White was one of the Los Angeles Zoo's most ardent admirers and devoted benefactors. "I have poured my heart and soul and money into this Zoo," she wrote in this magazine in 2009, "and have worked hard for the many improvements that you've witnessed over the years."

Throughout her busy Hollywood career, Betty remained a steady presence at the Zoo. Always ready to roll up her sleeves and get to work, she was a longtime GLAZA trustee, a Zoo Commissioner, served on countless committees, and

worked behind the scenes to raise funds for new animal habitats and initiatives. And, because of plans that she put in motion before she died, her legacy will continue to live on in myriad ways here, including establishing a private foundation supporting the place she called her "home away from home."

"Several years prior to her passing, Betty and her attorney and I met to review her estate plan," says White's longtime friend, business manager, and advisor, Glenn Kaplan, who now serves as trustee of her private foundation and executor of her estate. "And we talked about doing something that would live on and not just be a one-time gift.

Since Betty loved the Zoo as much as she did, and derived so much pleasure from it, she wanted to find a way to encourage and support others to do the same."

Betty and her team quickly honed in on the idea of expanding access

to the Zoo, especially to young people. Betty's own love of animals began very early, and she hoped to spark that same fascination in children who might not otherwise have the opportunity to visit the Zoo. "Families with two working parents, or students at inner-city schools, for example, who aren't likely to go because of the cost, transportation, and logistics of getting there," Kaplan explains, "so, we set up a private foundation, the sole focus of which would be to allow thousands of students each year to be able to participate in the Zoo and its programs and not worry about the cost or transportation."

As it turned out, those ideals and goals aligned with a preexisting program, Zoo Pals, which offered scholarships to qualified schools to cover the cost of transportation and admission. It was decided that rather than reinvent the wheel, Betty's foundation would improve it, greatly expanding the program's offerings, capacity, and funding.

Betty passed away on December 31, 2021, just weeks shy of her 100th birthday. In June 2023, the creation of "Betty

White's Zoo Pals" was announced during the Zoo's annual fundraising gala, the Beastly Ball. The setting was apropos: the Beastly Ball had always been one of Betty's favorite events. She attended nearly every year, with a few exceptions when she was filming out of town.

The announcement was followed by a call for donations, with her foundation matching those gifts, dollar for dollar. It was wildly successful, Kaplan says, raising much more money than anticipated. "Which was tremendous. It translates into more people who can participate in Zoo Pals—as well as extending the life of the program for many, many years."

Betty's foundation has also funded scholarships to Zoo Camp, expanding access to that popular program to that popular program to families with financial need. Betty devoted so much of her life to the well-being of animals, and these gifts are a natural extension of that legacy, Kaplan believes. "To share her love and knowledge of animals and inspire others to learn and do more ... Betty would be thrilled and excited."



JAMIE PHAM



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Sprouting Scientists

by **BRENDA SCOTT ROYCE**

“Look!” a first-grader points at a Fly River turtle as it pokes its snout above water.

“He’s swimming.” Her classmates crowd around, squealing with delight and commenting on what they see. “His nose looks like a piggy,” one says. “Can he breathe under water?” another asks. One child sketches in the little notebook he carries. Then the group is ushered to the next habitat, their excited titters bouncing off the walls of the LAIR, the Zoo’s home for all things reptile, amphibian, and invertebrate.

This group is one of 60 Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) classes awarded Betty White’s Zoo Pals scholarships this school year. The scholarships provide free Zoo admission, transportation, and programming to kindergarten through 5th grade teachers and their students.

The idea behind the program is to encourage scientific thinking among its young participants—not just teaching kids about science but empowering them to do it.

“It’s divided into three sessions,” says L.A. Zoo Learning & Engagement Curator Renae Coterio, who coordinates the

program. “The first is all about *thinking* like a scientist. In the second one, they are *acting* like scientists. Finally, by the third session, they can be a scientist.”

This transformation takes place over a period of three months, with the first two sessions taking place on the kids’ home turf (facilitated by Zoo instructors Henry Conde, Sara Vazquez, Cris Vasquez, and Laura Frost), and culminating with a field trip to the Zoo for session three.

THINKING LIKE SCIENTISTS

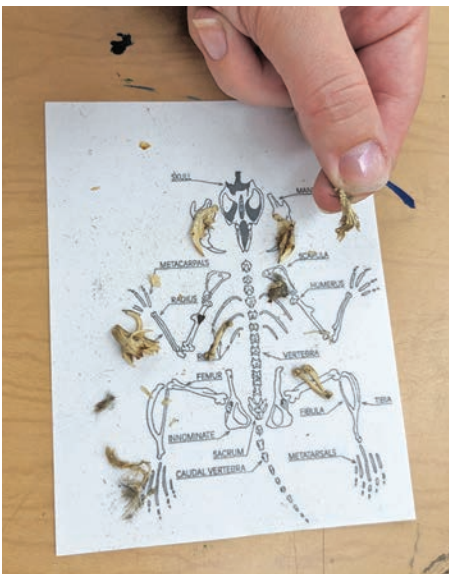
The team splits in two, with two Zoo instructors visiting the participating classrooms and two remaining at the Zoo to livestream. “In the classroom, the kids learn about animal adaptations and watch a livestream from the gharial habitat,” she says. “Our instructors encourage the kids to practice making observations and ask questions about whatever they observe.”



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LAURA BARNARD



JAMIE PHAM

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Applications for the 2024–25 Betty White’s Zoo Pals scholarships will open in September 2024. Please visit: lazoo.org/zoo-pals

ACTING LIKE SCIENTISTS

The second session takes place about a month later. The Zoo instructors lead the students through a hands-on science activity, building on the concepts they’ve previously learned. The activity varies by grade level. “For the younger students—kindergarten through second grade—they create a diorama of an animal habitat,” Cotero says. “We give them all the supplies, and they think critically about what to put in their habitats. Third through fifth graders do owl pellet dissections, which is an activity that grosses some kids out at first, but by the end, they love it!”

BEING SCIENTISTS

By the final session, the students’ anticipation for their Zoo field trip has reached a fever pitch, and their instructors have laid the groundwork for success, planting the seeds of what it means to be a scientist: making observations, asking questions, and sharing what they’ve learned.

Among other supplies, each student receives a specially created notebook they can use to record their observations as they tour the Zoo. The boy who drew the Fly River turtle

shows his sketch to a genuinely impressed instructor, who prompts him to wonder why the turtle’s nose looks the way it does, and why it keeps bobbing its head above water. Exchanges like this are part of why this program is so popular—not only for the students but also the staff.

“It’s one of my favorite things that we do at the Zoo, because it’s about sparking curiosity and building relationships,” says Cotero. “We want them to have a sense of belonging, too. To know that this is their Zoo.”

Since the sessions are spread out over three months—a very long time in the life of a child—she is also able to witness the transformations that take place along the way. “The students start out really shy, but by the end of it, they love their instructors, they love coming to the Zoo, and they feel comfortable asking questions and practicing new skills.”

A total of 60 classrooms (representing 1,420 students) participated in the program in the 2023–24 school year. For many, the field trip was their first-ever time visiting this or any zoo. It’s a safe bet that for most, it won’t be the last. ■