WE NEED A GAZELLE TODAY

While studying the smallest of organisms, Beth Schaefer (B.S., Microbiology, 1990) realized that she wanted to work with lions, tigers and perhaps pangolins. She’s now general curator at the L.A. Zoo. Below, she explains how she got there and why she’s so passionate about zoos.

HOW DID YOU GET FROM MICROBIOLOGY TO BEING A ZOOKEEPER?

When I volunteered at the Charles Paddock Zoo in Atascadero, I realized that I wanted to be a zookeeper. When I had the opportunity to talk to people about the animals and see them get intrigued and involved, I knew instantly, “This is it.”

WHAT EXACTLY IS A ZOO CURATOR?

Zookeepers care for animals on a day-to-day basis. Curators decide what species of animals to bring to the zoo, like the curator of a museum.

DO YOU MISS WORKING DIRECTLY WITH ANIMALS?

I think everyone in zoo administration misses the animals, but you see that you can make a bigger difference in their lives if you’re willing to take on a leadership role. Helping the animals has always been my driving goal.

WHAT’S YOUR FAVORITE PART OF THE JOB?

Maybe the best part is when our visitors realize the biodiversity. They see these animals they didn’t even know existed.

HELPING THE ANIMALS HAS ALWAYS BEEN MY DRIVING GOAL.

For example, the L.A. Zoo as a whole consulted on the movie “The Jungle Book.” There’s a character in there called a pangolin that’s also one of the most endangered animals on the planet. The reason it’s in the movie is that an L.A. Zoo curator suggested it. And now the whole world knows about the pangolin.

WHY ARE ZOOS IMPORTANT?

I work with a program that rehabilitates baby gorillas whose parents have been killed by poachers. It’s hugely rewarding to take 20 years of captive animal experience and use that to help animals that might go back into the wild. This is one of the big reasons why zoos are relevant. We learn so much about animals’ behavior and medical care. Studies done in zoos translate into the wild. Look at the California condor. If it weren’t for the L.A. Zoo, there would be no California condors in the wild.

DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE ANIMAL?

One of my favorite species is orangutans. They’re very smart and flexible in their thinking. One of my favorite individuals was Tempest the raven, who was also very smart. She was always looking for a way to annoy you. She would steal the sunglasses off your head.” One day she stole a $20 bill out of a zookeeper’s pocket and ripped it up.

ANY ADVICE FOR CURRENT STUDENTS?

Follow your passion. Don’t worry about the money. Staying authentic to yourself and what you want to do is really important. Don’t be afraid to get outside your comfort zone. There’s a whole wide world out there. //