

# Providing a ‘Disney’ experience while championing conservation

David Tyler

Carrie Large loves her job.

The executive director of the Friends of the Rosamond Gifford Zoo sees endless possibilities for the zoo to capture the imagination of its visitors while serving its dual mission of protecting from extinction species from around the world. Plus, she said, her kids think it’s cool.

Carrie, who describes herself as an animal person from an early age, took the role in 2020 and in the three-plus years since has been developing a team of innovators to bring the zoo to new heights. The Rosamond Gifford Zoo is actually two organizations that work hand in glove to move the zoo’s mission forward. The facility and animal-care side of the zoo is owned and operated by Onondaga County and the Friends is a separate not-for-profit that is responsible for the guest experience, including membership, the gift shop, food and beverage, events, education, fund-raising, marketing and public relations.

“It’s so exciting and innovative – how do we impact environment, conservation, animals in the wild – and how do we actually give our community members that might not be able to fly to Disney, that kind of experience. I didn’t understand what a great opportunity this truly was,” she said. “It’s just the opportunity of a lifetime. It’s truly been a dream job.”

At first glance, Carrie’s background wouldn’t necessarily seem to lend itself to the management of a zoo. A native of Fairport, after graduating from college with the hopes of being a physical education teacher, she took a job with the arena football team in Rochester. She then moved to Syracuse and spent 17 years in community health at ACR Health, where she started as a care manager on the front lines treating clients who were HIV positive before moving in development and eventually taking the role of deputy executive director of operations.

“You put those two together and it’s the perfect background to become the executive director of a zoo because you want that guest experience, you want that enhancement, but you also want that community outreach, that connection,” she said. “It’s actually the best background I could ask for ... shooting t-shirts out into the crowd to working for ACR health and finding out what are the needs in the community and how to tackle those needs.”

In the three-plus years since Carrie took the post, she has focused on building a team of directors and staffers and leaning into their expertise to continually innovate the zoo’s programs and offerings. The core tenets of the work culture Carrie is building are fun, innovation, empathy and communication. “That’s what we hold each other accountable for,” she said. “If you don’t invest in your team, and you don’t make sure that they’re enjoying it and they’re having fun, how are they going to do their work, day in and day out. It’s a great honor to have a team that is absolutely working at such a high level.”

Like any workplace, there is a lot to do and it can be overwhelming. When that happens, Carrie said she makes sure she takes a moment, goes for a walk in the zoo, sees the guests and makes sure they’re having fun and engaging and “having those Disney experiences that we’re trying to achieve.” Those moments help her stay grounded and not take her role for granted.

“You can get pulled in here pretty strongly and just get engulfed by it. But we make sure that everyone takes a break and enjoys their family,” she said. “But also – you’re at a zoo and how can you not have fun.”

One of the first initiatives the zoo took upon Carrie’s arrival was the renovation and rebranding of the café. Initially a Burger King and then the Jungle Café, the menu and décor of the restaurant had become stale and dated. The new Honeybee Café brings a brighter, more modern feel, with a wider menu selection that features healthier offerings. There’s also an educational component. In the wild, elephants will often forage on sugar cane crops, creating conflicts with humans. To prevent crop damage and conflict, humans will create bee barriers around the edge of their fields to keep the elephants from entering. Soon, she said, they will announce the expansion of the Honeybee Café into Skaneateles, continuing the mission of zoo outreach into the community.

Having now gotten its liquor license, the zoo is also now doing monthly pairing dinners - either a beer or wine paired with a five-course meal - each themed around one of the animals. Several other fun, educational and themed events are also on the calendar, including Party for the Planet, Fall Conservation Bash, LGBTQ day, Senior Day and Elephant Day. This year, there will also be large life-like dragons – some as large as 25 feet tall – displayed throughout the zoo. With the dragons in house, Carrie said they will host events targeting Pokemon and Dungeons & Dragons enthusiasts.

Soon, with some seed money the Friends secured from National Grid, botanical gardens will be planted at the zoo’s main entrance, the main courtyard where the duck pond is currently and on the hillside between the tiger and elephant exhibits. Carrie said she anticipates there will be plants grown in the botanical gardens that will be enriching for the animals at the zoo as well as things that can be used in the Honeybee Café.

All these initiatives are having an impact. Annual attendance at the zoo has grown to more than 350,000 and the zoo now has 10,000 members, up from around 7,500. Stronger attendance means the zoo has a wider audience for its conservation message.

“That’s our biggest thing – we want people to connect with the animals; to understand why we want to save them. What does it mean for our whole world if some of these animals going extinct?” Carrie said. “These animals aren’t here just for show. There’s a reason, there’s research happening. We’re making sure they don’t go extinct and we are their protectors. We’re here to take care of them.” swm