

Trainer for a Day

is a new Aviary program designed for all ages — teens and adults. It allows individuals a fascinating, one-on-one, behind-the-scenes experience into the world of the bird trainers at the National Aviary. Teens under 17 participate as part of a team with an adult partner. “Trainer for a Day is an incredible opportunity to get close to many spectacular and rare birds, and to see the level of care, expertise and time it takes to feed, train and maintain the health of the more than 700 birds in our collection,” says Nicole Begley, Supervisor of Animal Programs at the National Aviary.

The first two teams to be Trainers for a Day were Mei Hume and her mother, Sue Ferrera, and Karena Gregg with her father, Scott Gregg. Both girls come from homes with several pet birds and were excited at the chance to help care for the Aviary’s birds and work with the trainers.



Karena helps a visitor with the daily feeding in the Wetlands of the Americas.



Mei cleans the penguins’ enclosure, which is off-exhibit for lack of space.

Mei and Sue by Sue Ferrera

*Mei Hume is a 12 year-old home-schooled student from Trenton, New Jersey. Mei wrote, “We listened to Jean Craighead George’s book *Frightful’s Mountain*. I learned about peregrine falcons and now I want to meet a falcon up close!”*

The day begins early, and the only time the trainers seem to sit down is for lunch. There is an incredible amount of work that goes into taking care of National Aviary residents! We cleaned cages. We chopped fruits and veggies. We sifted worms. We got nose-to-beak with some very cool birds.

And while learning to flock with the National Aviary birds was a treat, working alongside the trainers was an absolute delight. I smiled when I read Mei’s observation: “Everyone there was

polite and fun to be with.” Personally, I couldn’t have hand-picked a better group of professionals to demonstrate the motto: Do what you love; love what you do.

This is not a stand around and watch situation. My daughter was in the thick of every activity. In addition to cleaning and feeding, she went out with trainers and assisted with demonstrations for visitors. She spent time helping to weigh raptors. She clapped in rhythm to make flamingoes dance.

When our day came to a close, I had to make sure my daughter was by my side and on her way into the car. I know had one of the trainers offered her the opportunity to spend the summer at the National Aviary, she would have stayed!

Karena and Scott by Scott Gregg

Karena is 16 and an honors student at Beaver Falls High School in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania. She’s a bird artist who hopes to become an ornithologist. For her senior project, she’s planning to do a raptor display for the new riverfront park in New Brighton.

We arrived at the Aviary at 8:00 a.m. and immediately began preparing diets for the residents. In the first hour we helped prepare raptor diets and then fed and weighed each of the birds. We didn’t realize so much went into preparing individually prescribed diets for each species or each bird.

We had never visited the Aviary before, and were both astounded by the Bald Eagles and the other raptors. We met each of them up close and personal. The morning concluded with helping in the avian hospital.

After lunch, Karena met Ninja, a quite tame but aggressive titmouse who makes her home in the Pennsylvania Backyard exhibit, and immediately fell in love. “I want to take Ninja home with me,” Karena said.

Then it was on to more fun feeding the birds in the Wetlands and the Tropical Forest. Next, Karena fed the penguins while I recorded the consumption of each. We ended the day helping with flight training in the wind tunnel where Houdini, an American Crow, had the chance to fly.

“I met a lot of new friends today,” Karena said, “and some of them have wings.”

Would you like to be a Trainer for a Day? For more information, visit <http://www.aviary.org/evnt/trainer.php>.

