

Wild Wednesday introduces children to exotic animals

AMANDA STOLL, Assistant Editor

Things got exciting, interesting, wacky and a bit weird on May 16 at KidsWork Children's Museum in Frankfort, when Animal Quest dropped by with a select few of its wild creatures.

Among the visitors were two guinea pigs, a pixie frog, a pygmy goat, a Patagonian cavy, a white-nosed coatimundi, a lop bunny, a chicken and a parrot, as well as Animal Quest owner Steve Reedy and animal handler Lottie Villarreal.

Throughout the program, Reedy entertained the children and parents in attendance with his high-energy program, while Villarreal brought out many of the different animals. Most of the animals were introduced by first having two children stand on the stage with their eyes closed, touching the animals and to guess what they were.

Some animals, like the coatimundi, Reedy handled himself and were not offered for petting because of their less-than-cuddly nature.

Reedy said allowing participants to touch as many of the animals as they can is important to him during his programs, because it completes the experience, especially for young children.

"It's been scientifically proven if you touch the animals it's more meaningful for you, and you'll remember that," Reedy said. "At some of these younger ages, they'll remember it for the rest of their lives [and] hopefully take away that there's other critters on this planet besides ourselves."

He said his program can help remind people to "treat

the planet a little nicer."

Angela Spero, manager at KidsWork Children's Museum, said the animal programs during Wild Wednesdays are always popular, but she guessed the beautiful weather last Wednesday kept people outside rather than in.

Even so, she estimated they had a crowd of about 60 people come out for Animal Quest's show, and with fewer children, more of them got to get hands on with the animals.

"My favorite part is just really seeing the kids enjoy the animals and seeing animals that they wouldn't normally see everyday or at a zoo," Spero said. "I really love their reactions to the shows and just putting a smile on the kids faces."

Spero, who started the Wild Wednesday programs three years ago out of her own love for nature and animals, said the programs offer something for all ages, whether they are children or parents.

"It's nice to have a program where the older siblings can have just as much fun as the little ones," Spero said.

The programs meld education and fun, and Spero said she appreciated the animal facts that were interesting to the adults as well as the information that were relatable to the younger children.

Many times, children — and adults — see cute, fluffy animals and think they might like to have one as an exotic pet; however, Reedy talked about why that might not be such a good idea.

Some of the animals featured during the program like the guinea pigs, bunny and parrot would make good pets for responsible

owners, others, like the cavy or coatimundi, would not.

When Animal Quest first started, Reedy said they had mostly small animals, like lizards, frogs and guinea pigs, but as his company grew he began to inherit a lot of animals, such as pigs, that do not make such great pets.

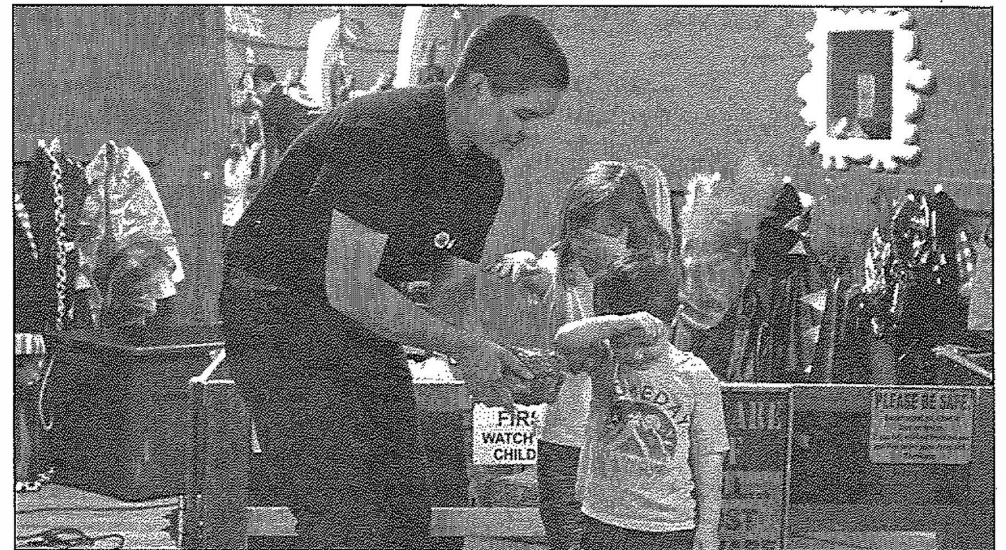
"We have like six pigs and four of them we have because people had them as pets and realized that either legally they weren't supposed to have them or they're just terrible as pets because they can get to be like 700 pounds and they can knock you over," Reedy said. "They can open your fridge, your freezer, your pantry, and if you let their tusks grow pretty large they could also kill you."

Although some of the more exotic animals he owns might be legal to own in the state of Illinois, Reedy said that still does not make it a good idea for people who do not have the kind of wildlife training he does.

He said he encourages people to ask questions and frequently engages people in conversation about the types of animals that do and do not make good pets to help them make that decision.

"I'm a wildlife professional," he said. "I went to school for 24 straight months of doing zoo keeping and wildlife education and animal behavior study [and] veterinary procedure study."

RIGHT: Steve Reedy, owner of Animal Quest, holds a white-nosed coati during the Wild Wednesday show. Coatis are in the same taxonomic family as raccoons.



Lottie Villarreal (left), an animal handler with Animal Quest, holds a pixie frog, while Declan LeCompte (front), 3, and Alexia Rogers, 6, attempt to guess what it is while keeping their eyes closed. PHOTOS BY AMANDA STOLL/22ND CENTURY MEDIA



Children watch the staff from Animal Quest set up for their show on May 16 at KidsWork Children's Museum. The program was part of the Wild Wednesday series held every month at the museum.

