

Chaffee Zoo's new employees make fresh start in Fresno

By Marc Benjamin
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Fresno Chaffee Zoo's African Adventure is creating a population boom, and not just the four-legged kind.

The zoo is recruiting new employees from across North America who are flocking to Fresno. Some are impressed by Fresno's commitment to expand the zoo through the tenth-of-a-cent Measure Z sales-tax initiative. Measure Z has raised \$100 million for zoo expansion. African Adventure's 13 acres will take the lion's share of the money, about \$55 million.

By the end of this year, Fresno Chaffee Zoo will hire 34 new employees, 31 full-time. The African Adventure exhibit, which opens in October, will employ 36 of the zoo's 200 employees. In addition to new employees, members of 11 species will also arrive, including rhinoceros, lion, cheetah and African elephant.

The zoo has hired 15 employees from outside Fresno, said Scott Barton, the zoo's director.

"I'm excited that Fresno Chaffee Zoo has become an organization that professionals from all over the country want to join," he said.

The new employees are all college-educated and becoming part of a city that is often considered a victim of brain drain, a place that the best and brightest flee to live elsewhere.

"Here's an example of Fresno being a brain and experience magnet instead of the opposite," Barton said.

34

Number of additional employees at Fresno Chaffee Zoo by October

The new employees have a fresh perspective on Fresno, which most often has a negative image because of air quality, the drought, heat, auto theft statistics and general livability.

"When new employees are coming to a zoo, they typically want to put down roots and know if this is a place where they can grow and develop," said Rob Vernon, spokesman for the Maryland-based Association of Zoos and Aquariums.

He said zoo employees always want to get involved with new exhibits, and moving to Fresno offers them those opportunities.

"Not many keepers get to start from the ground up," said Sara Bazley, referring to November's renewal of Measure Z that will add another eight acres of exhibits in the zoo over the next decade. "And the zoo is going to continue growing and changing."

A recent arrival from Colorado, Bazley cares for "hoof stock" — zebras, giraffes, rhinos and antelope — but she said she regularly answers questions about her recent move from Colorado Springs, where she grew up. The Cheyenne Mountain Zoo is landlocked and has little growth potential, she said.

As for moving to Fresno, "There hasn't been a moment of regret," she said.

Vernon Presley moved to Clovis with his wife, Nicole, and two children from Toronto because of Fresno's growing reputation in the zoo industry. He and Nicole both work at the zoo.

“It’s pretty cool to see the excitement that is building in this community,” he said of the zoo expansion. “This zoo has really strong community support, and what I like is that it’s actually showing what the money has been spent on.”

Because they have children, the Presleys researched the Fresno-Clovis area thoroughly.

“The opportunity here was appealing and then reading about the area and the school system put us at ease,” he said. “If we didn’t feel this was a family-oriented place, we wouldn’t have come.”

Presley will be working with elephants. At the Toronto Zoo, he worked with elephants for 18 of 19 years, but the zoo phased out its elephants in late 2013 in response to pressure from animal-rights advocates. Fresno will have three African elephants — two are there now — for Africa Adventure’s opening.

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Vernon Presley, assistant curator of elephants

Ashley Coffey, a lead elephant zookeeper, noticed pretty quickly that Fresno Chaffee Zoo has “a unique connection to the community.”

She joined the zoo staff after four years at the Georgia Aquarium, where she worked with whales in Atlanta. She also has a background with cheetahs, another new species for the zoo, and was familiar with Sea Lion Cove, which won an exhibit award from the Association of Zoos and Aquariums last year.

“I don’t think I’ve worked in a zoo where I’ve seen people who say they’ve come here since they were kids,” she said.

Assistant educational curator Taylor Wiebusch came from the Disney Animal Kingdom in Orlando, Florida, because she wanted to continue working in animal education.

“I stayed on the career path I am most passionate about,” she said.

While Disney offers new opportunities for its workers, the temptation to leave animal education and advance in other areas was always looming, she said.

“The more I learned about this zoo and the Africa Adventure project, the more it seemed like an amazing opportunity,” she said. “Everything is on such a large scale, and no detail was spared.”

Fresno’s sense of community was a reminder of her Midwestern upbringing, while Florida was more of a tourist setting, which wasn’t as appealing.

Shannon Nodolf, who came from Abilene, Texas, where she was the zoo’s only veterinarian, will work alongside the zoo’s longtime lone veterinarian, Lewis Wright.

Coming to Fresno brought her closer to family in Sacramento but also relieved her of being “always on call” as a zoo’s only veterinarian, as she was in Texas.

“Anyone I know who had been here raved about what a great zoo this is,” she said. “Fresno was on the radar, so when I saw the opening, I applied and was lucky enough to get the job.”

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Al Smith, Greater Fresno Chamber of Commerce

The zoo boosts the Fresno area by attracting tourists and locals, said Al Smith, president and chief executive officer of the Greater Fresno Chamber of Commerce. The fact that employees coming to work at the zoo are highly educated

professionals will help raise the community's profile even more.

"This is a world-class operation we have here," he said. "I like the idea that there is a level of professionalism required, and we have an entity that requires it."

When Measure Z was approved, residents wanted a better zoo with high-quality exhibits, but being able to attract high-caliber professionals is a bonus much in the same way Community Regional Medical Center is a teaching hospital for the University of California at San Francisco's medical education program in Fresno, Smith said.

The perspective of outsiders viewing Fresno in a positive light can only help its image, which typically has been just another punchline.

"We are having these (new) people witness what's happening in our community," he said. "Not the image that a Los Angeles comedian sees."

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