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Contact: Donato DiRenzo  
Communications Coordinator  
(585) 336-7202 or [ddirenzo@senecazoo.org](mailto:ddirenzo@senecazoo.org)

### **Seneca Park Zoo Hosts Rochester's First DreamNight at the Zoo!**

**Rochester, N.Y.** – Monroe County's Seneca Park Zoo and the Seneca Park Zoo Society hosted the Zoo's first ever DreamNight at the Zoo on Wednesday, July 12<sup>th</sup>. DreamNight is an inclusive cost-free evening for children with special health care needs and disabilities to enjoy the Zoo in a quieter environment than a normal day at the Zoo, without social stigma, and with other families who understand the unique challenges they face. **This event was invite-only**, and the Zoo worked with a number of community-based organizations serving children with special needs. Partner agencies include Autism Up, Best Buddies, CompassionNet, CURE Childhood Cancer, David's Refuge, Daystar Kids, Golisano Children's Hospital, Parenting Village, ROC City Sicklers, Ronald McDonald House, SKIP of New York, URMC Development/ Behavioral Pediatrics, and UR Medicine Home Care.

"The Seneca Park Zoo is one of the most prized attractions in all of Monroe County, and I'm so pleased that we could host this special event for these children and their families," said County Executive Adam Bello. "The Dream Night experience makes it possible for them to see the animals in their habitats, to be immersed in a world of wonder and culture while getting connected with nature. Hosting this event is a testament to how well we can work together as a community to help bring a smile to the faces of children with special health care needs and disabilities."

Families had access to the entire Zoo grounds and all animal habitats. The night also featured a variety of costume characters with an appearance by Batman, Oscar the Grouch, and mascots including local favorites Spikes, Mittsy, and Moose, face painting, and unique animal

experiences. Keepers, docents, and staff from the Zoo, Zoo Society, and The SSA Group ensured the best possible guest experience, along with additional onsite resources. Autism Up assisted the Zoo in converting a conference room into a Quiet/Sensory Room, and the Zoo's animal health staff hosted a teddy bear clinic. Valet service for the more than 1,000 guests was made possible by the Glover Crask Charitable Foundation.

"When your child receives a life-changing diagnosis it can be a lonely time, so when an organization like the Seneca Park Zoo recognizes the journeys of these patients and families and sets aside a night to honor and celebrate them, it's a very welcomed invitation," said DreamNight partner lead Jennifer Johnson, Director of Family & Community Outreach at UR Medicine Golisano Children's Hospital. "Our patients and families connected and reunited at this event, creating community beyond this special night and supporting one another in ways that can be hugely beneficial. All of us at Golisano Children's Hospital are grateful to the Seneca Park Zoo for bringing DreamNight at the Zoo to Rochester."

The concept for "DreamNight at the Zoo" originated in 1996 in the Netherlands at the Rotterdam Zoo when animal keeper, Peter van der Wulp, acknowledged how rarely children diagnosed with cancer were able to visit the zoo. Seneca Park Zoo is the 300<sup>th</sup> institution to become a part of DreamNight, and is one of only two zoos in New York State for host DreamNight.

"Our mission is to connect our community with nature and inspire them to act on behalf of saving wildlife and wild places," said Zoo Society President and CEO Pamela Reed Sanchez. "Efforts like DreamNight help us provide a safe place for families for whom coming to the Zoo on a crowded summer day might be difficult. We are proud to work with Monroe County to host this special evening for these families."

"DreamNight is the perfect example of how strong our community can be when we come together to support those who are neurodiverse and who may be living with a disability," said Autism Up Executive Director Sarah Milko. "We are so fortunate that Seneca Park Zoo recognizes, embraces and celebrates these differences! On behalf of all AutismUp families, I want to thank the Zoo for making DreamNight a reality."



Internationally, and in our own backyard, Seneca Park Zoo plays a key role in species survival. Chartered as an educational institution in 1957 by New York State, the Seneca Park Zoo Society plays an integral role in supporting Monroe County, the owners and operators of the Zoo. Together, we are working to bring animals back from the brink of extinction.