



August 8, 2024

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Seneca Park Zoo Hosts DreamNight 2024

Rochester, N.Y. – Monroe County’s Seneca Park Zoo and the Seneca Park Zoo Society hosted the Zoo’s second annual DreamNight at the Zoo on Wednesday, July 7th. 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 several 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, Prime Care Coordination, ROC City Sicklers, Ronald McDonald House, SKIP of New York, URMCC Development/ Behavioral Pediatrics, and UR Medicine Home Care.

“This is among the most rewarding events we host each year, with staff and volunteers feeling incredibly proud and humbled to be a part of it,” said Zoo Society President and CEO Pamela Reed Sanchez. “Inclusion is an important part of who we are at Seneca Park Zoo, and to be able to provide this evening to special families in our community, is an honor.”

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, the Ghostbusters, Kat the Mermaid, Dazzle the Unicorn, mascots including local favorites Spikes and Mittsy from the Red Wings, and Moose of the Rochester Americans, 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 the Conference Center space into a Quiet/Sensory Room, and the Zoo’s animal health staff hosted a teddy bear health clinic. Caswell for Kids supported a First Aid tent and

valet service for the more than 1,000 guests was also provided. Additional support from the William and Sheila Konar Foundation, Excellus BCBS, and Golisano Foundation also helped make DreamNight possible.

“In 2023, at the first DreamNight at the Zoo in Rochester, I witnessed families in tears of joy. Many shared that the night brought a sense of community and acceptance in ways they hadn’t experienced before. While only together for a few hours, families bonded over topics that they often feel isolated by. Creating a sense of community for families who have children with special health care needs is important – it’s beneficial for the kids and their caregivers in so many ways.” said DreamNight partner lead Jennifer Johnson, Director of Family & Community Outreach at UR Medicine Golisano Children’s Hospital. “All of us at Golisano Children’s Hospital thank those who made DreamNight 2024 possible including the many partner agencies who worked together on the details and especially the Seneca Park Zoo team for their leadership and excitement around honoring and celebrating our patients and families for a second year.”

“AutismUp and the families we support are so grateful to the Seneca Park Zoo for offering this fabulous event again this year. 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 CEO and Parent Founder Sarah Milko. “We are so fortunate that The 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.”

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 300th institution to become a part of DreamNight and is one of only two zoos in New York State to host DreamNight.

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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.