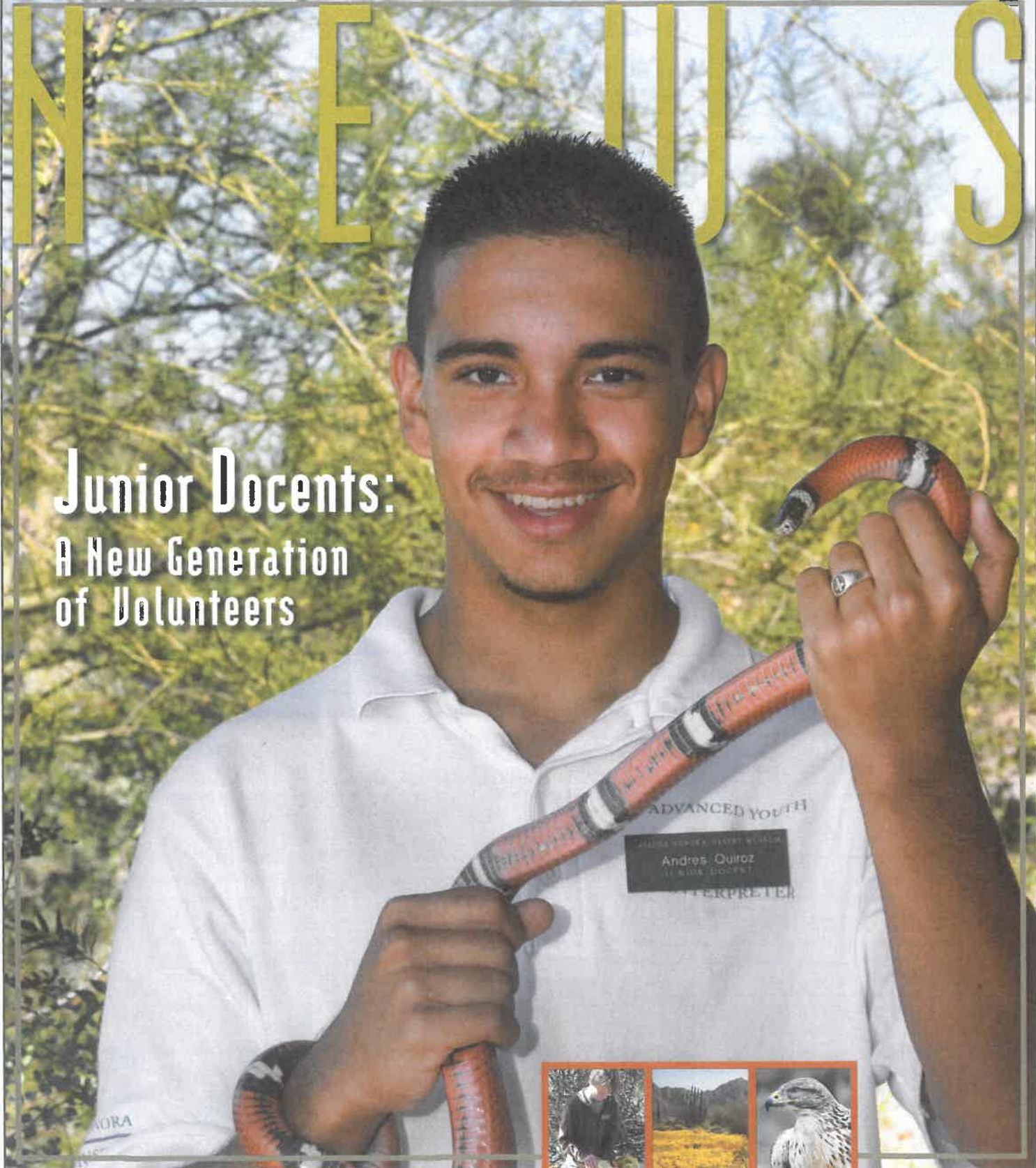


ARIZONA-SONORA DESERT MUSEUM

A NEWSLETTER FOR MEMBERS OF THE ARIZONA-SONORA DESERT MUSEUM • VOLUME 12 ISSUE 1 • JANUARY-FEBRUARY-MARCH 2011

NEWS

Junior Docents: A New Generation of Volunteers



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Junior Docent Andrés Quiroz. © 2010 Rhonda Spencer

The Junior Docent Program:

By Sonora Orchard, Junior Docent

THE DESERT AIR SMELLS OF PALO VERDE AND GOLDEN SUNSHINE AS I MAKE MY WAY ACROSS THE GROUNDS OF THE ARIZONA-SONORA DESERT MUSEUM,

then into the dark of the cave, and set out a collection of artifacts about bats native to the region. Each guest entering the cool cavern is surprised to come around a dark corner and find my partner and me in our Junior Docent uniforms with a table full of pictures, skeletons, and mounts.

“Check this out,” chuckles a father to his small daughter, who is momentarily too busy examining fossils of ancient sea life to notice any of my little bats. But then, as she turns and sees the furry creatures and the photos of their incredible faces, her nose scrunches up like she’s seeing something icky.

“I don’t particularly like bats,” interjects her mother, warily.

I smile and say, “When you know more about them you may change your mind. Bats are some of our most misunderstood creatures. Not only do we have 28 species of bats living in Arizona and 50 native to the Sonoran Desert, but over 1000 species live around the globe, making up nearly a fourth of all mammal species world-wide.”

She is doubly amazed. First, that there are so many bats in the world. And second, that a young person like me knows all these facts and figures. But I am just getting started. I surprise the family even more by saying, “A big brown bat can eat between 600 and 1000 insects in one hour! They help keep our neighborhood mosquito populations to a minimum.”

My partner then explains how valuable bats are to desert plants, and that saguaros are heavily dependent on the lesser long-nosed bat for pollinating their flowers.

About the Author

Sonora Orchard has been part of the Junior Docent program for four years. She attends Catalina Foothills High School in Tucson, Arizona.

The little girl’s initial distaste is replaced with wide-eyed wonder. I show them photos and point out a place in the exhibit where they can see how bats hang upside down to rest during the day.

“Don’t they get dizzy?” the little girls asks.

My partner laughs, and says, “No. That’s the way they like to sleep.”

The mother exclaims, “Ha! And I always thought bats were just creepy little furry things that fly.”

As the family moves away from us I can hear them speaking about how wrong they had been about bats. I can only hope that their wonder will become respect, and respect will become motivation to live better in harmony with our desert. As I think about this, I come to realize that being a Junior Docent— We call ourselves JDs! — has made me a better person. Being a JD allows me to deepen my knowledge and communicate my passion for the natural world. For this family, they are now more appreciative of at least one small part of the Sonoran Desert.

HOW THE JUNIOR DOCENT PROGRAM BEGAN

To understand why I became a Junior Docent, and why your son or daughter may want to be one as well, I want to tell you briefly about the history of the program. The Museum has had an adult docent program almost since the beginning.

Each year, tens of thousands of children visit the Desert Museum with their teachers, youth leaders, or parents. Seeing a need to relate on a different level to these younger visitors, as well as to their parents, the Junior Docent Program was founded in January 1995 with only 12 sixth-grade students. In its early years, the JD program invited students from select middle schools.

It has expanded until it currently includes 32 students ages 13 to 18 from all parts of Tucson and the surrounding areas.

Since 2000, when the program was upgraded with regular mentoring, training, and a more rigorous schedule, 116 young people like me have participated as JDs.



1950s teens working with raccoon. © ASNM Archive

The role of the Junior Docent includes learning Sonoran Desert natural history, and teaching it to the Museum’s visitors using kits and live animals

PROGRAM GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

While I can’t speak for all the JDs, a big reason I am one is that it’s a lot of fun! I’m sure the adult docents have fun, too, but they also use more adult reasons like goals and objectives. I took the following from the materials in our orientation class.

1. The program’s focus is on helping teens build skills and knowledge they will need as leaders of a more sustainable future.
2. The program gets participants personally involved in the Museum’s mission: to inspire people to live

Building Tomorrow's Leaders

in harmony with the natural world by fostering love, appreciation, and understanding of the Sonoran Desert.

3. Junior Docents learn directly from Museum staff about the flora, fauna, and geology of the Sonoran Desert region. They also learn and practice interpretive techniques for stimulating an interest in the natural world, while becoming more deeply connected to nature themselves.
4. Through their conversations with Museum visitors, Junior Docents not only educate and motivate the public, but they also develop confidence in public speaking.
5. The Museum endeavors to familiarize young people with the diversity of science-related positions accessible to them in the future.
6. The Junior Docent program strives to develop a network of junior volunteers who can be effective educators among peers, younger students, families, and neighborhoods in order to inspire their communities to have a healthy relationship with the desert that is their home.
7. (This one is mine.) AND IT'S FUN!

WHAT ARE THE REQUIREMENTS TO BE A JUNIOR DOCENT?

1. You must be between 13 and 16 years old at the end of the school year to apply.
2. This is really important. Since the training is pretty intense, and a lot of people will be counting on you, you need to commit to being in the JD Program for two years. No, you won't be here every single day for two years. As a JD, I come out to the Museum twice a month on Saturdays and volunteer six hours of my time each day. I spend most of my time sharing information about the desert with Museum visitors.
3. Your parent or guardian has to sign a form to give you permission to do it.

YOU GET TO LEARN (AND SHARE) GREAT STUFF THAT YOU'LL NEVER FORGET.

To share information with the visitors, first we have to know a lot about a lot of things. That's not to say we have all the answers, but our training covers a bunch of topics that range



from saguaros to fossils, and rattle-snakes to minerals found in the desert.

After the first year of the program, JDs can get training on the handling of native animals including the desert tortoise, tiger salamander, lilac crowned parrot, pack and kangaroo rats, the desert tarantula, an assortment of snakes, and raptors like the American kestrel, western screech owl, and Harris's hawk.

I love being a JD. But don't take just my word for it. Here's what other Junior Docents are saying —

"I joined the program because I was looking for a community service opportunity, and I love animals," says Ciera Yates, a first year Junior Docent.

"I just love seeing the expressions on visitors' faces when they learn something new," are the remarks of Na-il Emmert, who has been volunteering at the Museum for five years.

"The JD Program has made me a more confident public speaker," says Emily Davis. "I have seen an improvement in my school work, and I feel like I can engage in conversation without worrying about saying something wrong."

Speaking regularly to strangers about subjects you are passionate about increases confidence and speaking skills beyond what any of the volunteers could have imagined.

"It has made me more responsible and more of a leader," reflects Michael Kaufmann.

Danielle Murdoch says, "Being a JD allows doors to open for my future in all different fields."

Marina Vollin highly recommends volunteering as a Junior Docent. "I would describe the JD program as a wonderful opportunity to learn about where we live, and share that knowledge with others. I love it, and anyone who is willing to learn would enjoy this program."

DIDN'T I TELL YOU IT WAS FUN?

Like me, each JD has a favorite aspect of the program, but you can count on the fact that everyone loves to handle the animals. It opens the door to unique opportunities and allows a hands-on experience with incredible animals native to our desert home.

All participants share a desire to experience the desert we live in and love, and to learn about the natural world. We all have a common longing to share our passion for, and knowledge about, the Sonoran Desert.

JD's are passionate about learning about our amazing desert, and love to inspire those they encounter. Being a

JD changes who you are, how you feel about yourself and others, and your outlook on the future.

The Junior Docent Program gives youth opportunities to assume leadership roles and develop invaluable workplace skills, building self-confidence, and greater leadership abilities.

Many of us joined the program in order to be with friends and meet new ones. But the JDs each expressed many other motives when they were writing their applications. And there's no secret we all enjoy each other's company, as you can tell by the constant, excited chatter here at lunch time.

If you're between 13 and 16, and would like to gain confidence, knowledge, and a different perspective about the Sonoran Desert (and have some fun!) I urge you to consider applying to be part of the Junior Docent Program.

For more information, go the Museum's Web site at www.desertmuseum.org/jrdocents or call the Junior Docent coordinator at 520/883-3083. Applications are due by April 23, 2011.



The Desert Museum's List Exchange Policy

For membership recruitment and fundraising purposes the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum periodically makes member name and address information available to other non-profit organizations so they may contact you about similar programs that may be of interest to you. If you do not want to participate in this exchange please contact the Desert Museum Membership office at 520/883-1380 and we will be pleased to respect your privacy wishes.