



Bathing The Big Girls

By Val Warner BA MSW RSW

And I do mean BIG girls. I'm referring to the female elephants at the Calgary Zoo: Maharani, her mom Kamala, and her aunt Swarna. Each weighing over 10,000 lbs, these lovely ladies are given a bath every day of the year - and, with 2 scrub brushes in hand, I got to help! Let me backtrack. As a Mom of 2 wonderful daughters, now grown up, I've always put them first. Volunteering for their school and extracurricular events was a top priority and since we moved around a few times while they were growing up, I realize I've volunteered in Ottawa, Winnipeg, San Diego, and even Maui - visiting King Kamehameha Elementary School to complete a brownie badge.

Now that my 1st born is an elementary school teacher herself, I get the double thrill of being "the teachers Mom" on field trips. (I overheard one little girl say "I was expecting her to have white hair!"). In Calgary alone I've spent happy times on many school trips: seeing and petting baby animals in Butterfield Acres, learning calligraphy and how to pick up marbles with chopsticks at the Chinese Cultural Centre (added delight - a scrumptious Chinese meal), biking with kids along the river pathways, and taking part in the Calgary Children's Festival where we learned math through dance.

But nothing, and I mean nothing, prepared me for the thrill-of-a-lifetime experience that awaited me recently at the end of a week of volunteering for Chevron Zoo School. Since my daughter and her teaching partner had 32 kids from grades 4 to 6 on this adventure, they were divided into study groups based on each child's first choice - gorillas, meercats, warthogs, giraffes, and elephants. I was assigned to be in charge of the elephant group. Now and then I would shout out "elephants" to round them up and if they needed to find me they would call out "matriarch," the term for the senior female elephant in a herd. All week long we observed, wrote about, and drew pictures of elephants, along with mini safaris to see what the other groups were learning.

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On our 5th and final day of Zoo School, all of us were treated to an extraordinary event - we were to help bath the three female elephants. Spike, the male bull elephant, is separated from the females for this event because male elephants are more temperamental. However these three females are so mellow and good-natured, thanks to the loving care they receive from their keepers Bob and Dave, that The Calgary Zoo is the only one in North America where members of the public are sometimes allowed, by special arrangement, to help with their daily bathing ritual. Talk about dedication - Bob has worked with the elephants for over 30 years, and Dave for over 14 years.

Now I have to tell you, washing the family car isn't remotely similar to the reality of having 2 scrub brushes in hand, and scrubbing the trunk, back, ears, and, yes, bum of an elephant! Their wet and shampooed hide feels like nothing else on earth, other than perhaps the weather-beaten skin of an old cowpoke with 4-day stubble. Crocodile Hunter Steven Irwin would have to concede that his "little beauties" would lose in a contest with these gorgeous hunks of femininity. Even being splashed by killer whales at San Diego Sea World pales in comparison to the waves produced by Maharani and Co. when they rinse off all together in their swimming pool sized bathtub. Maharani, by the way, is expecting a baby and is half way through her pregnancy of 22 months!

Can volunteering get better than this? I know this is a hard act to follow, but I'm counting on my daughter to keep on inviting me to many more field trips. Remember this story the next time you find one of those volunteer sheets in your child's backpack - and sign up!

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