

CityLife

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Animal House

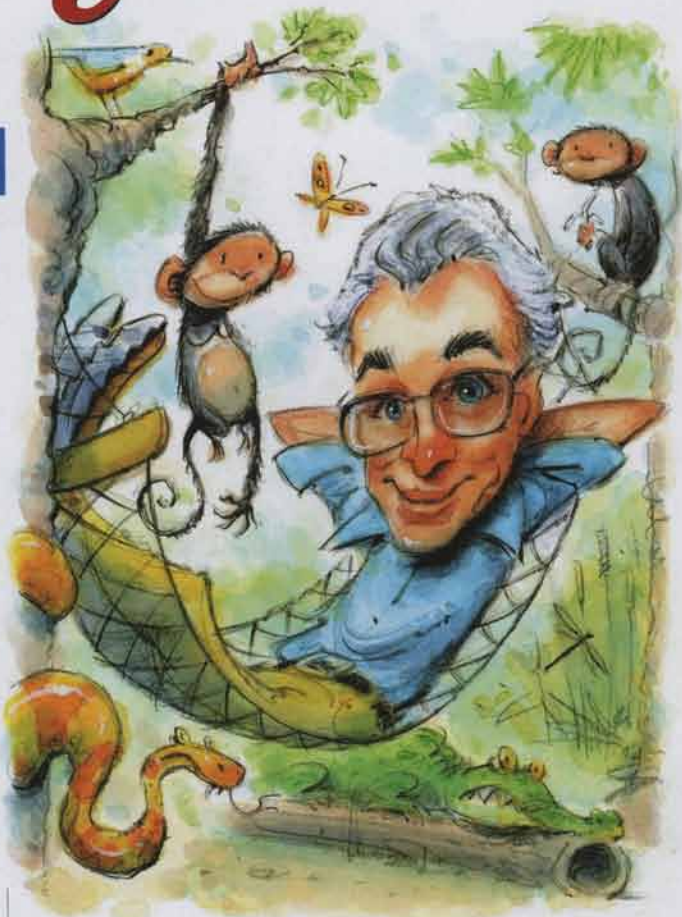
For more than 40 years, Don Kuenzer helped build the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo we know today. So when he announced his retirement as the popular RainForest attraction he helped create readies for its 15th anniversary, we asked him for a farewell tour.

Don Kuenzer knows every inch of the place. He walks purposefully, pausing to let toddlers run by, pointing out plants, mentioning each animal's favorite hiding spot. Each exhibit inside the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo's expansive RainForest has a story. And as its curator, Kuenzer knows them all.

"The exhibits are designed with a wild view," he says. "People are used to looking at old exhibitry — a pastel-painted cage with a dead stick. You didn't have to look [for the animal]. Here, you have to look."

Approaching the Bornean orangutan enclosure, he walks to the glass and puts his hand against it. "I'll just call her over," he says. Mama orangutan Kayla, baby Daniel clinging to her shoulder, walks over and puts her hand up to his.

Kuenzer recently retired after more than four decades of service helping create today's zoo. As we walk through the RainForest, he greets everyone by name: The security guard, maintenance man, ticket-taker and animal keepers.



"My style of management is to work with people, not just tell them what to do," Kuenzer says. "You build relationships. ... It is like a family."

His devotion to the zoo began in 1960 while a student at West Tech High School. Kuenzer and a friend won a trip to Africa after identifying animals in a zoo contest. Enthralled by the experience, he pestered the zoo's director for a job and was offered a part-time post at the zoo's children's farm in 1961.

"In my career, literally, I've worked every job [at the zoo]," Kuenzer says. "Grounds maintenance, general maintenance ... the only job I didn't do was night watchman."

Kuenzer became the zoo's assistant general curator in 1975. Although he didn't have a zoological degree, his eagerness to

learn made him a natural. He became general curator of animals, served as acting director, supervised the opening of the Primate, Cat and Aquatic Building and was involved with developing the zoo's Wolf Wilderness, African Savanna and Australian Adventure.

Then, Kuenzer began working on his dream project: The RainForest. New exhibiting methods allowed for habitats with real plant life, natural waterfalls and exhibits where animals of different species could mingle.

"It livens the exhibit," Kuenzer says. "If the animals are sleeping, people will look and then walk away. If they're active, people learn more."

Kuenzer, who has visited Central America, South America, Borneo, Malaysia and Chi-

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na for the zoo, will now have plenty of time to travel. He's already planned an October trip to Africa. But he's also looking forward to the wildlife in his Medina County backyard. "I own several acres. ... I'm going to build a house and manage my woodlands, marsh and streams on the property."

He'll also still offer consultation to zoos and looks forward

to working on local conservation efforts.

And at the RainForest, children will continue to enjoy the interactive space. Kuenzer motions to an exhibit where visitors walk down a flight of stairs to view an underwater ecosystem.

"The biggest thrill was when I saw a child lie on this incline, and the crocodile was on the log," he recalls. "I noticed the

child was talking to the crocodile, through the glass. When I see interactions like that taking place, it's all worth it."

— *Tori Woods*

This year, the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo celebrates its 125th anniversary and is inviting donations of family pictures taken at the zoo, souvenirs and essays for inclusion in a special exhibition. For more information, visit www.clemet zoo.com/anniversary.