

Animals

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Thankfully, the following day two of the remaining three armadillo pups were rescued and transported to the von Arx Wildlife Hospital; the fourth armadillo pup was the biggest of the litter and apparently was too quick and elusive to capture.

All three armadillo pups were placed in a large recovery space in the bird room at the hospital. The armadillos hadn't gone long without their mother's care so they were alert, active and in good body condition. Staff offered the armadillos a diet of earthworms and a liquid protein slurry mixture. The babies wanted nothing to do with the slurry but eagerly ate the earthworms. Two of the babies began to show signs of having a respiratory infection so all three were started on an antibiotic. Currently the three armadillos are responding well to our treatment regimen.

Nine-banded armadillos almost always give birth to four identical pups. Reuniting the littermates means the youngsters will have each other to bond with and they will engage in normal behavior just as they would if they were in the wild. Visit the Conservancy's Facebook or Instagram page to see a video of the three armadillo pups having breakfast at the von Arx Wildlife Hospital.

Please, if you see a young animal you believe may be orphaned or in distress, call the wildlife hospital immediately while continuing to monitor the situation. Hospital staff can provide information and assistance. Our priority is to keep the public safe as we



An orphaned nine-banded armadillo is offered a fresh diet of earthworms while recovering at the von Arx Wildlife Hospital. OLLEEN DURHAM/SPECIAL TO THE DAILY NEWS

help an animal get the care it needs.

A woman phoned the wildlife hospital late one evening after finding a young green heron on the ground. The heron was clearly too young to fend for itself so the woman transported the heron to our facility for care. The following morning the woman called again, she had found two more young green herons wandering on the ground. These two babies were siblings of the heron she rescued the previous night; they also needed professional care. She immediately brought them to the hospital.

The herons were at an in-between stage of development. They weren't quite able to forage for themselves but they were completely wild so being in a captive situation was stressful. Staff offered the herons a variety of fish but they showed no interest in eating fish that weren't alive (it is very common for certain species to not want to eat food that isn't alive). Staff called a few bait shops in town but none had small live fish suitable to feed the herons.

Hospital staff recalled that Sam Washburn, a Conservancy staff mem-

ber's son, was skilled at catching minnows. Sam eagerly agreed to catch a bucket of minnows for the herons. The herons gobbled up the live minnows; having access to live fish and practicing 'normal' fishing behavior resulted in the herons eagerly eating the smelt and finger mullet offered by staff, even though those fish weren't alive.

Caring for the herons has proven challenging due to their high stress level. Every effort has been made to keep them in a quiet enclosure that has dense foliage. In the wild, green herons often stay partially concealed in vegetation when they are fishing; mimicking the herons' natural environment while they are rehabilitating at the Wildlife Hospital reduces their stress and promotes normal behavior.

Thanks to Sam and the Washburn family for going above and beyond to help our most vulnerable wildlife patients. Their eagerness to help truly made a significant impact on the care we were able to provide these young herons. Their willingness to get involved was inspiring.

What actions can you take to help wildlife that

will result in a positive impact on the environment? Maybe something simple, like keeping a towel and box in your car so you are prepared to help if you encounter an injured animal or, make a commitment to monitor your pets when they are outside so they can't injure wildlife? If you are an angler, only fish with barbless hooks thereby lessening the injury done to the fish. Plant native plants. Educate friends and neighbors to respect wildlife. There are so many ways to help wildlife thrive in a world that has been devastatingly altered by humans; the first step is having empathy for other living creatures.

Recent releases

A raccoon, 18 mottled ducklings, six Northern mockingbirds, three Virginia opossums, five Eastern cottontails, four mourning doves, a loggerhead shrike, a Northern cardinal, a brown thrasher, a Florida soft-shell turtle, two gopher tortoises, a downy woodpecker, three royal terns, a blue jay, two common grackles, two red-bellied woodpeckers and two osprey were recently released.

Opportunities to help

Support the Conservancy's mission to protect native wildlife. The von Arx Wildlife Hospital is hosting a virtual Wildlife Hospital Baby Shower on Saturday, June 5, to raise awareness and support for the hospital's youngest patients. Donate gifts online through the Conservancy's Amazon Wish List through the month of June. Visit

www.conservancy.org/babyshower. Every donation supports the Conservancy's work to protect Southwest Florida's water, land, wildlife and future.

Joanna Fitzgerald is director of the von Arx Wildlife Hospital at the Conservancy of Southwest Florida, 1495 Smith Preserve Way, Naples, Florida 34102. Call 239-262-2273 or see conservancy.org

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Diversity, equity and inclusion take center stage at the Naples Players

Robin F. DeMattia
 Blue Zones Project-Southwest Florida

During some shows by the Naples Players, the house lights remain on, the sound is turned down, and audience members are told in advance about when loud or startling moments might occur. Guests, capped at 50 percent capacity, are also free to walk in and out at all times.

These are sensory-friendly performances that provide access to theater for people with special needs.

This program is just one way the Naples Players, a Blue Zones Project Approved worksite, supports people with physical and mental health challenges and their families as part of a broad education curriculum of online and in-person classes for everyone.

"Our mission is inspiring our community and defining our culture," said Craig Price, director of community education and wellness. "We make sure that every aspect of theater – singing, dancing, acting, improv, and volunteering – is available to everyone."

To reach children with special needs or current life challenges, the Naples Players partners with organizations such as NCH Healthcare System, Collier County Public Schools, STARability, Grace Place Kids and Avow Kids.

These programs have continued online during the pandemic and are starting to open back up for in-person sessions.

During the "Improv for Communication Skills" class, for example, high school students in the school district's transition program, who have intellectual disabilities, learn skills to help them plan for post-school work or studies when they age out of the program at 22.

Price takes traditional fast-paced improv games and gears them toward what the students need.

"We learn listening, supporting each other, saying yes to the support we need, taking risks and learning to let go of mistakes," Price said.

He also focuses on recognizing emotions, he said, because many of his students have autism and have a difficult time recognizing and showing emotion and also making eye contact.

"The things we teach in these games are so important in the real world."

Participants from STARability not only take an improv class weekly, they also volunteered once a week at the theater, prior to the pandemic, to learn additional skills. They assisted with costumes, painting scenery, filing and cleaning.

The theater partners with NCH Healthcare System and Collier County Public Schools on Project SEARCH, an international job skills training program for young adults with developmental disabilities. Price and Dianne Durante, a licensed marriage and family therapist, discuss tools for dealing with anxiety in the classroom, home, and workplace.

Price uses improv to develop their interviewing skills.

"We play fun and interactive games that teach how to remember names, how to respond to questions, customer service, and how not to be so nervous in interviews so they can get a full-time job."

He said many of the participants get hired by NCH to work in the cafeteria, janitorial services or offices. The Naples Players also has paid internships available for participants in its education programs.

While students in these established programs continued to participate during the past year, many people throughout the community found solace and strength in all of the theater's education programs, particularly if they were isolated at home.

"Mental health is something we've been working with because it's such an important issue," Price said. "Keeping connected through theater has been such a valuable tool, especially online in the past year when people felt so disconnected. They were in such desperate need of connection with each other."

He goes off-site to locations such as The Arlington and online with the Naples Senior Center to teach improv techniques that help caregivers with loved ones who have Alzheimer's or dementia.

"They have to be ready for anything, think quickly on their feet, and treat their loved ones with patience, love and creativity," Price said. "It's a great class."

Price said all of the theater's education programs tie into several Blue Zones Power 9 Principles.

"So much of the singing, dancing, acting and improv is helping us find that tribe," he said. "That bond you feel when you're performing with a cast or working backstage with a crew, plays into Down Shift, Right Tribe and finding your Purpose. You're able to get involved with a group of people outside of work and school. So many of the kids and adults we work with find a confidence from being involved with the theater that helps them with school, work and at home.

"The lasting friendships that people make at the theater are a huge benefit of the education program," he continued.

But the benefits extend to audience members, too, especially children.

"Exposing your kids to the arts has lifelong benefits," he said. "We know that we can learn empathy and compassion by experiencing someone else's life through a play."

The Naples Players performs in the Sugden Theatre at 701 5th Avenue South. Learn more at naplesplayers.org or call 239-263-7990.

Brought to Southwest Florida by NCH Healthcare System, in collaboration with Sharecare, Inc., Blue Zones Project is part of Southwest Florida's well-being improvement initiative that encourages changes in the community that lead to healthier options. For more information, visit southwestflorida.bluezonesproject.com.