

**Forest Preserves of Cook County  
Public Hearing on 2017 Budget  
November 15, 2016 – Cook County Building**

Hello, my name is Tony Perez. I have been interested in wildlife ever since I was a kid. And I have been a Conservation Science Scholar at Brookfield Zoo for two years. I have spent over 300 hours so far working at the zoo and talking to visitors about the species that live there. I want to tell you about how much it has helped me to be a Scholar.

The Scholars Program has been a very accepting place for people with disabilities. I have autism and sometimes I have a hard time talking to people and doing other things. But now I am able to talk to other Scholars at lunch and on Facebook. It helped a lot with my social skills. I have friends in the Scholars Program now.

The Scholars Program helped me with my social skills in another way. It allowed me to talk with kids about wildlife. I ask kids what they know about the species they are observing and I get the chance to educate them. I especially did this with the rock hyrax and the snow leopards. I was able to teach kids the difference between Orinoco and Dwarf crocodiles. At the exhibit Habitat Africa: The Forest, I most like talking with people about the Okapi. In the clouded leopard rain forest, I prefer to talk with guests about the binturongs.

Educating children about animals is something I may like to do in the future. And being a Scholar made me feel like I will be able to do that someday. I also may like to be a spotted hyena researcher, and maybe other species of hyena too, and in the Scholars Program I have had the chance to meet with wildlife biologists who work in the field and to attend their lectures. I personally liked the lectures by Dr. Greg Rasmussen, who studies African painted dogs in Zimbabwe.

I have learned a lot about wildlife conservation, too. For example, I was able to take part in a session where we represented several organizations that raised Humboldt penguins and negotiated on the best way to breed them.

Not only does the Scholars Program helps kids get a better understanding of animal species, it helps those of us who want to have careers in conservation and wildlife advocacy. It gives a voice to people like me who maybe otherwise wouldn't have one, and the chance for me to share all my knowledge about wildlife. It also helps to show that zoos like us don't just have animals on display for people's enjoyment, but also for educational and conservation purposes, too.

Thank you for letting me speak with you today.