

**Forest Preserves of Cook County
Public Hearing on 2019 Budget
October 29, 2018 – Sixth District Courthouse, Markham**

Good evening commissioners. My name is Evelyn Valle and I am from the southwest side of Chicago, specifically Brighton Park. I graduated from Yale University with a degree in Economics in 2015. I am here to speak with you about the opportunities that the programs at Brookfield Zoo offered me. I began my involvement with Brookfield Zoo when I was 7 years old. I participated in ZAP!, Kids Club (now Zoo Explorers Club) and YVC (now known as King Conversation Science Scholars). All of these programs have shaped me into the person that I am today.

I first started participating in ZAP because my mother learned about the program through a family friend. She was interested in having us exposed to materials that were not being taught in school. While we did have science classes, no class gave the depth and understanding of nature and conservation that the ZAP program exposed us to. Because I started the program as a younger child, I was exposed to topics before my classmates were. I remember knowing about different environments, different species and our effects on their survival, and different ways that we could respect and coexist with nature well before our class discussed them. Being ahead in science allowed me to excel in my class and help others understand what we were learning. While my mother was the reason that I started in the program, I continued because I became genuinely interested in the topics and made lasting connections along the way. Some of these connections were with peers my age, others were with the program heads such as Saira Bensett, who has followed our family with honest interest in our well-being. This is something that is unique to Brookfield Zoo's programs.

Brookfield Zoo's career ladder programs not only allowed me to learn more about animals and nature, but also allowed me to develop my communication and presentation skills. Talking to (and educating) strangers about animals and their habitats while participating in YVC (King Conservation Scholars), while difficult at first, made me better at talking to others and presenting ideas. It also helped me realize that I like education and is part of why I currently work at a high school in Chicago. I truly believe that my experiences at Brookfield Zoo are part of what allowed me to be admitted to Yale University. Having interactions that I was able to write my personal statement about made me unique applicant to my alma mater.

Now, as an adult, I can see why parents like my mother would want to involve their children in these programs. While I do not have children of my own, I do have younger nieces and nephews that actively participate in the program. They are engaged in every single class and get an experience that cannot be found elsewhere, including some schools. Because the program has several adults leading each session, each child is able to get more individualized attention that they get in a school. This leads them to really take home each lesson and apply it in their everyday lives. I could see this through my then 5-year-old brother. While at Starbucks one day, after ordering a frapuccino, he noticed that the barista had left the water running. He looked at me and asked me a question that I will never forget. "Why does she want to waste our natural resources? Doesn't she know she should turn the water off?" At the time, I laughed the comment off. However, I now see that he has an appreciation for nature that most kids his age do not. Most children wouldn't think twice about having water running. In fact, they might leave it running while brushing their teeth. However, programs like ZAP, Zoo Explorers Club, and King Conservation Scholars inculcate good habits that can positively affect our planet now and, in the future, especially at such a critical time for so many ecosystems.

I would like to end by thanking all of you for your support for the Brookfield Zoo programs. I also urge you to continue doing so as these programs allow Brookfield Zoo to educate many young minds and can ultimately make the difference that we need in order to take care of our home. Thank you.