

**Forest Preserves of Cook County  
Public Hearing on 2019 Budget  
November 8, 2018**

Good Afternoon Commissioners and thank you for having me. My name is Sandra Ortiz-Ortega. I am the Coordinator for the King Conservation Science Scholars Program at Brookfield Zoo, and I am excited to share with you the many ways in which the program has shaped thousands of students throughout the years, myself included.

My journey with Brookfield Zoo began, unbeknownst to me, around 2005. My parents decided to move our family to the zoo's nearby town of Cicero, and one of my new elementary school teachers would regularly use Brookfield Zoo tickets as door prizes for students who turned in their assignments on time. On one lucky day, I scored some of those tickets. I ran home and convinced my mom that with the four tickets I had won, she would only have to pay admission for her and my dad (little did I know about free days)! That day at the zoo became one of my most treasured memories. My dad is a steel worker and my mom worked doing maintenance in the Chicago loop at that time. As a child, family outings were far in between, but in one trip to the zoo, I felt as if we had visited corners all over the world.

Years passed, and as I grew older, I would always refer my curiosity back to that visit. When I looked at my future, I knew I wanted to help others, but I did not know how. At the end of my first year in high school, one of my mentors handed me an application to the Youth Volunteer Corps (King Conservation Science Scholars). I figured that since I liked animals enough, and loved volunteer work, I would give it a shot. I was not prepared for what I would gain from the experience. As a Youth Volunteer, I was able to meet other students from all over the Chicagoland area, students like me, who were also eager to save the world. Together, we gained practical skills, like public speaking, professionalism, and customer service. We also took a variety of science workshops, and engaged in informal conversations about animals and conservation, both amongst ourselves, and with the millions of guests that walk through Brookfield Zoo's gates every year. Like many of the other kids in the program, I quickly became obsessed with the feeling of accomplishment that comes from sharing valuable information about conservation with people of all ages. More importantly, I learned about the impact science had on my everyday life.

I never got over that obsession of sharing science with others, and as I became a young adult, I was more and more convinced that there is a transformative power that occurs when people understand the natural world around them. I went on to college, returning to Brookfield Zoo over the summers to work as a Community Program Assistant. I eventually graduated from Northeastern Illinois University with a major in Biology and minor in education. Now, as the Coordinator for the King Conservation Science Scholars program, I get to see the same transformation occur in the hundreds of teens that we host in our programs every year.

This diverse program currently includes 250 students, 54 percent of which, come from underserved communities. I am ecstatic to see the students develop and learn all about the different ways, they too, *can save the world*. I thank this board for their continued support to Brookfield Zoo, and the ability you provide our programs to continue inspiring conservation leadership to students and communities from all over the Chicagoland area. Thank you.