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Brevard Zoo expands offerings for guests with special needs

MELBOURNE, Fla., March 1, 2018 — As part of an institution-wide initiative to enhance accessibility, Brevard Zoo has rolled out several programs, offered at no additional cost, to address the unique needs of community members with special needs and their families.

“We believe everyone has the right to experience the Zoo and the great outdoors, regardless of their ability,” said executive director Keith Winsten. “We’re excited to be taking these bold steps forward on our accessibility journey.”

The Exceptional Nature Space (ENS), completed last year, is a 4,700-square-foot behind-the-scenes play area designed to provide its users with an unstructured, authentic outdoor experience. Amenities include fort-building materials, “mud paint” and a water play table. The ENS was made possible by Alstom Foundation, the John and Carol Craig family, Doug and Joni Norton, the Peggie and Martin Avalos family, the Nelson and Gretchen Cover family and attendees of 2016’s Safari Under the Stars event. Interested parties can register for free play in advance on the Zoo’s website.

“We find that due to mobility or sensory-processing challenges, many children with special needs don’t spend as much time outside as their peers,” said special need coordinator Lindsay Mathisen. “The ENS is a safe, natural area designed to accommodate individuals’ differing needs.”

Late last year, the Zoo became the first zoo in Florida to receive sensory-inclusive certification from Birmingham-based nonprofit KultureCity. Experts trained staff in all departments how to welcome and accommodate guests with autism, post-traumatic stress disorder and related conditions. The Zoo established “quiet zones” in low-traffic areas and introduced “sensory bags” containing headphones, weighted lap pads, “fidget toys” and other items individuals with sensory-processing disorders sometimes use to cope with crowds and loud noises.

A free-to-attend "Sensory Night" is scheduled for Friday, March 23 from 5 to 7 p.m. Guests can experience the Zoo's temporary animatronic dinosaur exhibit with sounds and movement turned off, explore the ENS and interact with representatives from organizations offering services to individuals with special needs. All participants must register in advance.

More information about these programs and registration for ENS free play and Sensory Night is available at www.brevardzoo.org/ens. Questions can be directed to Mathisen at lmathisen@brevardzoo.org.

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Brevard Zoo is home to more than 900 animals representing 195 species from all over the world. As a not-for-profit organization, it is a leader in the fields of animal wellness, education and conservation. More information is available at www.brevardzoo.org.

Treetop Trek features five aerial obstacle courses that whisk guests above parts of the Zoo and through lush Florida landscapes. More information is available at www.treetoptrek.com.