

# NORTHWEST PASSAGES

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## Zoo campers give goldfish extreme habitat makeover

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Current Correspondent

“You’re ready to live in the wild,” whispered the camper as he shook the goldfish vigorously out of a plastic bag and into the lily pond at the Tregaron estate in Cleveland Park.

It may not be quite “wild,” but it’s close enough for both Sydney Jacobs, an environmental educator at the National Zoo, and the 7- and 8-year-olds attending the Zoo’s Summer Safari Day Camp. The group helped release 440 fish to the recently restored pond on July 14.

And the campers took the task to heart: “We’re helping the community and helping them lay more eggs so they can live with another fish and be happy,” said one.

Each week, the Zoo camp offers a focus on a different theme: Campers see animals, learn about the environment and take trips to local parks.

The 15 campers releasing fish

at Tregaron were participating in a program called “Extreme Home Makeover: Zoo Edition,” which focused on animal habitats.

To teach them about fish and beaver habitats, Jacobs was glad to take the kids to Tregaron, a former private estate now open for public use.

“Rock Creek is too dirty to take kids to,” she said.

And Tregaron offered not only a spot to let loose fish, but also a more concrete challenge: building dams. The campers marveled as Jacobs showed them a beaver skull and talked about the animal’s remarkable ability to alter the envi-

ronment by creating dams. There were gasps when Jacobs told the kids they would get a chance to build their own.

And build they did. The students broke into groups and used mud, rocks and sticks to create barriers in the streams that run through Tregaron.

“Our dam was actually work-



Bill Petros/The Current

**Campers release goldfish into a restored pond at the Tregaron estate in Cleveland Park. The National Zoo’s Summer Safari Day Camp focuses on a different environmental theme each week. A recent program involved a trip to Tregaron to study the habitats of fish and beavers.**

ing!” said one camper.

Another volunteered to help a struggling crew: “He’s desperately needing help, and we’re the dam-building crew to give it to him!”

Like many environmental educators, Jacobs favors a hands-on approach. “Being outside is really important,” she said. But her program also offers a conservation message: “We’ve changed our planet. Now we need to learn to live sustainably,” she said. “That’s a message that needs to be given to adults as well as kids.”

Program aide Michaela Burton, a high-schooler who met Jacobs as

a participant in an environmental service program for kids, described an environment hanging in “a thin balance. ... We could wind up like in ‘Wall-E,’ or it could get better,” she said, referencing the 2008 Pixar film in which humans have abandoned a trash-covered Earth. “So it’s important to tell kids — here’s the issue, here’s something you can do.”

Chase Douglas, another high school aide, was a camper at the National Zoo before he began volunteering with Jacobs. He said sharing environmental information

with kids is important and potentially powerful.

“Kids are receptive if you tell them in the right way. They like to meet a challenge head-on,” he said.

Tregaron is a particularly suitable location for teaching these environmental lessons. The property, which recently became available for public use through the nonprofit Tregaron Conservancy, is being restored to a design by noted early 20th-century landscape architect Ellen Biddle Shipman. Restored historic paths with new

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# CAMPERS

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signs are now open for visitors.

Bonnie LePard, executive director of the Tregaron Conservancy, said the property hosted visitors from a variety of schools in the area this year, including Oyster-Adams Bilingual School, Maret School and Eaton Elementary School. She said a place like Tregaron plays an important role in a city where many schools have limited green space.

On the sunny July day, LePard said she was glad to see the park full of children and walkers. “We want to benefit the public. Tregaron is a neighborhood asset and a national treasure.”

She was also glad to learn that the pond where the fish will now live is in good shape: Jacobs and some eager campers took the temperature and measured the pH, with one informing LePard that the latter was neutral, meaning the pond shouldn’t grow too much algae. LePard said the fish will be able to live “forever” — or, at least, through the winter.

Finally, the aides explained to their charges that they needed to dismantle the dams to prevent the



Bill Petros/The Current

## **Zoo campers release fish at the Tregaron estate.**

streams from pooling and changing the landscape. Campers responded with some dismay, but quickly set to the work of tearing down walls. Soon the streams were flowing freely again and the rocks and sticks were scattered throughout the wetland area.

Campers gathered briefly before returning to the Zoo to wash their hands and recap the day’s learning. “They can live with mud for a little bit,” Jacobs said as the crew left Tregaron for the day.