

Volunteer View: Sky's the Limit at Local Museum

by K_Guice

Imagine birds swooping over head, working in an old saw mill or eating lunch with a fox. Those are just a few of the many wild things volunteers do at the High Desert Museum.

The museum, a nationally acclaimed treasure, has been expanding its programs and is looking for talented, dedicated volunteers to help deliver a high-quality experience and have fun too.

“Our volunteers do a lot of interesting things around here,” according to Cathy Carroll, communications and promotions manager of the High Desert Museum. “They handle birds of prey, help care for the museum’s animals, work with rare western artifacts and share their enthusiasm and passion for the cultural and natural history of the high dessert.”

Barbara Webb expresses her passion for wildlife through volunteering. She is a wildlife biologist by profession, but her job mostly involves writing reports.

At the museum however, she gives talks about birds of prey and assists at bird flight shows. She revels in showing visitors hawks, falcons, owls and other birds that people rarely get to see so closely.

"They actually applaud and thank me for the presentation," said Webb. "I just love that feedback."

Carroll said, many of their volunteers enjoy portraying historical characters of the past. “They can be anyone they want to be as long as it’s from the history of the high desert. They research that character and bring it to life at the museum.”

The volunteers bring high desert history to life as homesteader, seamstresses, fur trappers and stage coach drivers.

While many of the volunteers are retired, there are volunteers of all ages. "We have one mother who volunteers with her 11-year-old son," Carroll said. There are rules; anyone under 12 must be with a parent.

The museum also has a very strong teen program, offering year-round internships and a summer volunteer program. However, space is limited and Carroll advises those interested in the summer program to sign up before all of the spots are taken.

"They get to learn about so much wildlife, living history and nature education," Carroll boasted. "And all of our volunteers are trained by staff experts in the area of the museum that interests them."

The options are endless. For example, people can be an animal interpreter. Those are individuals who are trained to handle wild life and help inform visitors about important and fascinating wild life facts.

Volunteers can tinker and fix things in the sawmill, which is then used around the museum. Those with a more artistic side can help with the monthly newsletter and photographers are invited to capture those picture-perfect moments.

"We also have volunteers who prefer to work behind the scenes; helping with the store, the admissions desk or doing basic administrative duties," Carroll said.

Volunteers who choose the high-desert adventure are required to volunteer 100 hours a year. That is eight hours a month and for most the time is well spent.

“You make great new friends, it allows you to continue life-long learning and it gives you a true sense of community,” Carroll said.

Dick Swinnerton agrees. His interest in American history prompted him to take an interpretive tour through the Spirit of the West exhibit five years ago and he was hooked. He decided to become a cultural history volunteer and developed his own popular lecture series on Lewis and Clark.

"It is not at all uncommon to have someone in the audience who knows more about a particular subject area than I do, so I am always learning," he said. "It stimulates me to do more reading and research."

Volunteering also has its perks. Volunteers receive a museum membership, guest passes, and discounts in the store, on classes and at special events. In addition, the museum throws a huge party for them each year.

Carroll said, “We want make sure our volunteers know they are appreciated because really, they are the life blood of the museum.”

For additional volunteer information call Tracy Suckow, volunteer assistant, at 382-4754. Bend Oregon, Central Oregon, K. Guice

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