

# THE WALLABY CONNECTION

## HOW LINCOLN CHILDREN'S ZOO IS MAKING A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

BY RYAN GROSS

“What is your favorite part of your job?” That is a question zookeepers are asked frequently. Their answers will vary depending on the animals they work with, but one element that is present in every answer is “a connection.” Just as adults spend many hours with their co-workers and children with their friends, zookeepers spend most of the day with their animals. During that time a bond is formed. A connection that often leads to life-changing moments.

In early 2014, zookeepers arrived at work as normal. As one of them checked in on the wallabies, they noticed the new joey was not in its mother’s pouch but laying on the ground. The zookeeper was amazed to find the baby was alive but near death. The keeper knew the wallaby had abandoned her joey and the only path for survival would be to hand raise it. The process of hand raising a wallaby joey is not easy and success is not a guarantee.

The first step was to nurse the joey back to good health. She lived in an incubator being fed and monitored around the clock. There were many times zookeepers thought she wouldn’t make it. As time went by she got stronger and the prognosis became more positive. However, the battle to keep this baby wallaby alive had just begun. The next

step would be as equally important as the previous—finding a pouch for her to live in.

Wallabies grow and develop in their mother’s pouch. Zookeepers needed a way to replicate that environment. They decided to buy a makeshift pouch that they would wear. This would give the joey the warmth and shelter needed to grow. This process would require a zookeeper to wear the pouch, with the joey in it most of the day. That meant wearing it during normal daily routines such as working, shopping and being at home.

Three zookeepers took part in this endeavor. They took turns wearing the pouch every day, feeding her and completing health checks. It was a difficult task but they knew the end goal was the survival of an animal. As time went on, she progressed and became healthier by the day. She could even be seen peeking her head out.

When the Zoo announced a baby wallaby was being hand raised by zookeepers, public support was amazing. Adults and children loved the photos of this adorable baby. The story gained national attention as Lincoln Children’s Zoo was one of the only zoos in the nation to hand raise a tammar wallaby. As she grew and became a healthy joey, the decision was made to let Zoo guests see

her at the Animal Encounter Stage. Here a zookeeper wearing the makeshift pouch would tell the story of the hand raised joey and occasionally she would peek her head out to the “oohs and aahs” of the audience.

This wallaby joey instantly became one of the favorite animals at the Zoo. Her story touched people’s lives. Jeanne Stelmach’s two children, Wyatt and Avery, found inspiration in her story. They wore their mother’s old purses around their necks with stuffed wallabies looking out. Pretending to be zookeepers helping raise a baby wallaby, they went everywhere with them.

This is a story of a bond. A connection between a zookeeper, an animal and the Zoo’s guests. It’s a story that has been occurring for the past 49 years at Lincoln Children’s Zoo. Over six million guests have walked through the gates of the Zoo. How many of them have had life-changing moments? This is the reason why Arnott Folsom created the Zoo, why nearly 200,000 people visit each year, why countless people find it in their hearts to donate and why the future of one of the nation’s smallest zoos is brighter than ever.

This story has a happy ending. The wallaby joey found clinging to life was named Liv.

