

Jessica Anderson talks to a group of school-age visitors about the special growing conditions required by tropical plants.

Teaching children about nature

Working with children in a municipal conservatory offers special rewards and challenges.

Many children in the Indianapolis, IN, area have visited Jessica Anderson (B.S. Recreation Resources Management and Forest Science 1999) at her “office.” Jessica is the Environmental Education Coordinator (and Volunteer Coordinator) at Garfield Park Conservatory in Indianapolis. She guides students through the conservatory and, in the process, imparts age-appropriate knowledge about the rainforest, plants and their various adaptations, bugs, and a host of other topics related to the environment. “I love working with the kids, especially the preschoolers,” says Jessica. “They are so ‘pure’ and enthusiastic.” For her school-age visitors, Jessica tries to leave them with a concept or two that they can feel proud to relay to their parents, perhaps something that their parents didn’t already know. “I also enjoy dispelling some of the myths the students believe about nature and the ‘wild’ outdoors,” says Jessica.

A secondary responsibility of her position is working with volunteers, many of whom have special needs. She trains them and finds appropriate tasks for them to do. She also staffs the conservatory’s reception desk where she fields



questions from visitors about the conservatory, plants, and the parks in Indianapolis in general. One thing that Jessica finds challenging is working for a government organization. Budget and political constraints tend to complicate many aspects of her job.

While a student at the UW-Madison, Jessica completed an internship with Dane County Parks. “I absolutely loved doing the internship,” says Jessica. “It was a well-run organization, I had a wonderful supervisor, made many good contacts, and learned a great deal,” she says. She recommends all students participate in at least one internship, both to use as a learning tool and to “try on” a career. She also advises: “It’s OK to hate your first job. You will continue to grow and develop and eventually will end up where you want to be.”