



Roger Meissen/Index

A biology student shows a local youngster a snake from the herpetology lab at a spring 2004 open house.

Snakes slither into local classrooms

Truman herpetology lab loans reptiles for educational purposes

Erin Musko
for the Index

Truman's reptiles and amphibians are doing their part for the Kirksville community.

The residents of Magruder Hall's herpetology lab – including snakes, lizards and turtles – participate in several local educational programs.

"I think it's important for kids to be exposed to these kinds of animals – the earlier the better," said Don Kangas, herpetology lab adviser. "I think most of our fear and behavior is learned from family."

The snakes and lizards accompany Kangas on classroom demonstrations. Additionally, he invites local 4-H clubs to visit the lab weekly to learn about and care for the animals.

Kangas said the lab has been in existence for nearly 20 years. He started conducting demonstrations in area classrooms about 14 years ago, and word has gotten around

in the community.

"Now public school teachers will just call me and ask me to bring some animals to their classes," he said.

Kangas has worked with a range of age groups, from kindergarten through high school.

"I give the classes a brief introduction to herpetology, the study of reptiles and amphibians," he said.

"I will talk to the students at approximately their grade level and give details about what kinds of animals they are, their life history, how they eat and what you can tell by looking at them."

Stacey Schromm, a fifth grade teacher at Ray Miller Elementary School, invited Kangas into her classroom for a lesson on vertebrates. She said Kangas showed up with a variety of snakes in pillowcases and one very large one in a trash can.

"I just said, 'Bring the animals,'" she said. "I knew whatever he wanted to do would be great. He saved the big one for

last. We didn't even know he had it in there."

At the end of each class demonstration, Kangas lines up the students, six at a time, and takes a picture of the children holding the lab's 9-foot-long python.

Schromm said even the kids who were apprehensive about touching snakes warmed up to the idea after they saw how much fun the other students were having.

Now the pictures of the students hang on the wall outside their classroom.

Kangas runs the lab with the help of student workers, but once a week a group of 4-H Club members, ranging in ages from 8 to 15, shows up to lend a hand.

The organization exists to encourage youth and adults to learn, grow and act as catalysts for positive change, according to the 4-H Council Web site. As vice president of Truman's Pre-Vet Club, junior Alana Walker coordinates several local 4-H Club activities, including the care of animals in

the herpetology lab.

Each week, after an informational session covering reptiles and amphibians, the 4-H Club members are assigned an animal in the lab to care for.

"They have to feed and clean the animals' cages," Walker said. "It makes the kids aware of how much work goes into caring for an animal and having a pet."

Walker said this program has been going on for at least five years, and so far it shows no sign of stopping.

Schromm said she plans to invite the animals back to her class next year as well because her fifth graders really enjoyed the lesson.

"After the snakes left one of the classes, the kids said that that was the best science class all year," she said. "When they remember fifth-grade science, [those snakes are] what they're going to think of."

Kangas is retiring at the end of the year, but he said he probably will drop by the lab occasionally. Scott Ellis, dean of science, will take over supervision of the lab. He plans to continue the demonstrations with the help of University student workers.

Volunteer PALS face difficulties

Grace Mattie
Staff Reporter

Maybe it was just a tease.

Coming from a family of five kids, freshman Gabrielle Crossman was relieved when she joined Campus PALS, People Acting Like Siblings, and had the opportunity to have a little one around again. Yet she ended up right where she left off when her PALS sibling, Felicia, stopped taking her calls.

"She hasn't even attempted to make contact with me, so I don't know what to do," Crossman said.

Crossman said she also was concerned that the program hadn't contacted her about it either.

But PALS member senior Sarah Murphy, vice president of big siblings, said she doesn't help those who don't help themselves.

"If you take the initiative [to contact me], I do respond," she said.

Prospective members can either apply online or sign up at the Activities Fair at the beginning of the fall semester. Then candidates go through an interviewing process, and Murphy said she pairs them with children who are most similar to them. Participating costs \$20, which includes an annual Christmas party and one T-shirt.

Parents of prospective children also must go through an application process. Murphy said she considers both the applications of the student and the child.

However, a shortage of children this year meant several students were not assigned a little sibling, Murphy said. She said this was because of circulation problems with applications at local schools.

Crossman initially was one of the students who did not make the cut, but she said she was contacted two months later.

"I was surprised to get one after such a long time because I wasn't expecting to get one at all," she said.

As a result of being contacted so late in the semester, Crossman said she not only dodged the \$20 fee, but she also only met with her little sibling about five times. When she came back after winter

break, Crossman had every intention of continuing to meet with Felicia. However, Crossman said she could not reach her.

"I got frustrated with it and thought, 'She can just call me,'" Crossman said.

Although the Campus PALS Web site has a list of activities that students can do with their little siblings as well as transportation preferences, Crossman said she has experienced difficulties in each of these areas.

"It's kind of hard around here because there isn't much to do unless you want to bring them back to your room and watch movies and paint fingernails," Crossman said.

Member freshman Michelle Hibbard said she has no problem figuring out what to do with her little sibling, Bre Wheeler,

but some of the activities require money.

"You can do free things, but it's just kind of expected that you know you might have to spend money," she said.

Also, Crossman said she unexpectedly had to drive Felicia either to her house or to her grandmother's house several times.

"I was so glad she knew where she was going because I was completely lost," Crossman said.

Crossman said she and Felicia also almost missed the Christmas party because no one sent her an e-mail about its location. She said she found out about the party from a friend who also was a member of the program.

Hibbard said she sees no reason for the program to have to e-mail its members.

Murphy said the program does not conduct regular meetings because of low turnout.

"We are kind of trusting people to be responsible because it's a child they're dealing with," she said.

However, Crossman said she understands.

"It's for you to have fun and learn responsibility by setting it up," she said. "I would recommend it [to others] if they go to the meetings [at the start of the year] and research it online."

"It's for you to have fun and learn responsibility."

Gabrielle Crossman
Campus PALS Volunteer



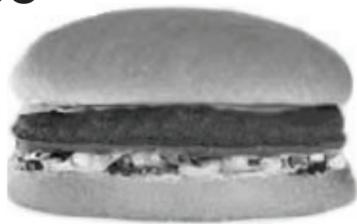
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