

The People's Museum

Volunteers give SNOMNH that Oklahoma feel.

BY BRENDA WHEELOCK

Sandy Dengler has the kind of life, at age 62, many people dream about. As a successful freelance writer, she has published more than 40 books for children and adults ranging from mysteries and romances to historical fiction and biographies. Yet it was not until Dengler became a volunteer for the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History that she was able to fulfill her own lifelong dream.

“When I was 6 or 7 years old, I wanted to be a paleontologist, but farm girls living in rural Ohio in the 1940s and ’50s would never imagine earning a Ph.D. or going into a ‘man’s’ field, or anything of that sort,” says Dengler. “It just didn’t occur to me.”

Dengler’s childhood dream was rekindled five years ago when she came across a newspaper article about OU seeking volunteers to help prepare dinosaur skeletons for its new museum. “Of course, I ran right over and jumped up and down with my arms swinging saying ‘take me.’ It was a dream come true.”



Mike Callaghan

For museum volunteer Sandy Dengler, more than 5,000 hours spent preparing dinosaur skeletons for exhibition are the realization of a lifelong dream. A freelance writer by trade, Dengler became so enthralled by her volunteer work that she is turning her avocation into a vocation by returning to the classroom for an advanced degree in paleontology.

In the last five years, Dengler has contributed more than 5,000 volunteer hours and is responsible for the restoration and painting of most of the cast specimens in the museum’s Hall of Ancient Life, from the 35-foot-long *Saurophaganax* to five baby *Tenontosaurus* skeletons. She also prepares fossils for the museum’s educational programs.

“Everything I do is fun and interesting, even routine stuff,” Dengler says. “I’m doing something that makes a difference—in history. That’s the rewarding part, making a difference.”

Dengler’s hard work and dedication recently earned her the museum’s Volunteer of the Year Award, but the experience, she says, has yielded even more rewards. It was the inspiration for her latest children’s book, *The Case of the Dinosaur in the Desert*, one in a series of New Sugar Creek Gang books co-written with Pauline Hutchens Wilson. More important, it inspired her to enroll at OU and pursue that



Ph.D. in paleontology. (She earned her master's degree in desert ecology in 1967.) "I figure I'll get my degree the same month I sign up for Social Security," she says, laughing.

"Sandy is a perfect example of the level of commitment and quality we're seeing in our volunteers," says the museum's volunteer coordinator, Jamie Hubbard. Since the museum opened in May 2000, some 250 volunteers have provided more than 28,000 hours of service—the equivalent of 16 full-time staff positions. But many more are needed and encouraged, Hubbard says. "Every extra smiling face just makes this place that much better."

To support its many programs and exhibits, the museum needs approximately 25 volunteers per day, each working in three-and-one-half-hour shifts. When museum administrators realized the complexity of coordinating and managing such a large volunteer work force, they called on the local Junior League for guidance. The League accepted the challenge by committing \$5,000 per year for three years to support volunteer programming. More important, they assembled a trained committee, including former League president Hubbard, to help the museum actually get the program up and running.

"The Junior League has provided an invaluable service to the museum," says Development Officer Dana Boren. "We couldn't have organized our volunteer program without their assistance. They have done everything from developing policies and procedures and writing the volunteer manual to providing staffing and choosing volunteer uniforms."

Hubbard says the committee drew inspiration from other successful museum volunteer programs, including the Aquarium of the Americas in New Orleans. "I spent two hours with their volunteer coordinator, who gave us every tip she could think of. Her volunteers are very happy, and that's what we want here—capable and happy volunteers."

Volunteer opportunities are offered in six areas:

- Staff assistants work in museum offices performing a variety of duties, such as filing, answering phones or assisting with mailings.
- Museum store volunteers assist customers or help stock merchandise.
- Customer service volunteers answer visitors' questions, provide directions, and keep brochures and maps stocked.
- Discovery Room volunteers work with families and children in an interactive, hands-on learning area. Special training is required.
- Education Programs volunteers assist with preparing learning materials and helping with classes and summer programs.
- Docents serve as guides and interpreters of various exhibits and galleries. A 12-week docent training course is required.

Every effort is made to match volunteers to the job that best meets their talents and interests, Hubbard says. Volunteers must be at least 16 years old and be willing to commit a minimum of six hours per month as a general volunteer and nine hours per month as a docent. All participants have the option of working weekdays or weekends. They are required to attend an orientation as well as training in their area of interest.

Hubbard emphasizes that no experience is required to be a volunteer, "just a willing heart. Each department will work with volunteers to ensure that they have the information and support they need to complete the job."

Among all the volunteer positions, those requiring the most

time and training are the docents. These unique volunteers spend two to three hours a week for up to 12 weeks in intensive training sessions led by museum staff and curators.

Frank Lawrence, a former docent for the Oklahoma City Zoo and lifetime animal lover, was among the first class of volunteers to complete docent training at the museum. In the last year, Lawrence has spent more than 500 hours guiding museum visitors through the popular Hall of Ancient Life and also doing some fossil preparation in the museum's paleontology lab.

Lawrence says the highlight of his job is interacting with children. "That is the most wonderful experience—to get a crowd of kids around me and to start talking trivia about dinosaurs. I try to get them to imagine what it would be like to be a dinosaur and have to swallow your food whole because you couldn't chew it. . . . I just love to see their eyes and faces light up when they discover something new."

Education officer Deborah Kay, who developed exhibits for the Hall of Ancient Life, gives her docent classes homework and reading assignments to prepare them for the variety of questions they will experience.

"They're learning so much more than what is on the label copy," Kay says. "They're learning about the exhibit-development process and a lot of behind-the-scenes things. They have an opportunity to attend lectures and ask questions of all our curators. And they get to rotate through all the collections upstairs and to see how artifacts are prepared and stored."

Since many of the docents do not have a science background, the trainers also lecture on fundamental topics. "We try to give them some appreciation and insight into what we do as scientists," adds Steve Westrop, curator of invertebrate paleontology. "Without the scientific content, this museum wouldn't be much different from Disney World."

Both Kay and Westrop are thrilled with the quality of docent volunteers who have attended their classes. "They're so enthusiastic," Westrop says. "If we continue to get people like this, we'll be in very good shape for the future."

The next class of volunteer docents will begin training in the fall. Volunteer applications are available on the museum Web site at www.snomnh.ou.edu or by calling the museum's volunteer office at 405/325-1652.

"The more people we can have to assist our guests, the better the visitor experience will be," adds Hubbard, pointing out that many museums seem to get by with little or no volunteer support. "But that wouldn't be consistent with our vision. This has to be a warm and friendly place. It's got to have that Oklahoma feel to it."



Robert Taylor

SNOMNH Docent Frank Lawrence is in his element when surrounded by children, "talking trivia about dinosaurs." Lawrence contributes a minimum of nine hours a month and completed 12 weeks of intensive training to qualify as a guide in the Hall of Ancient Life.