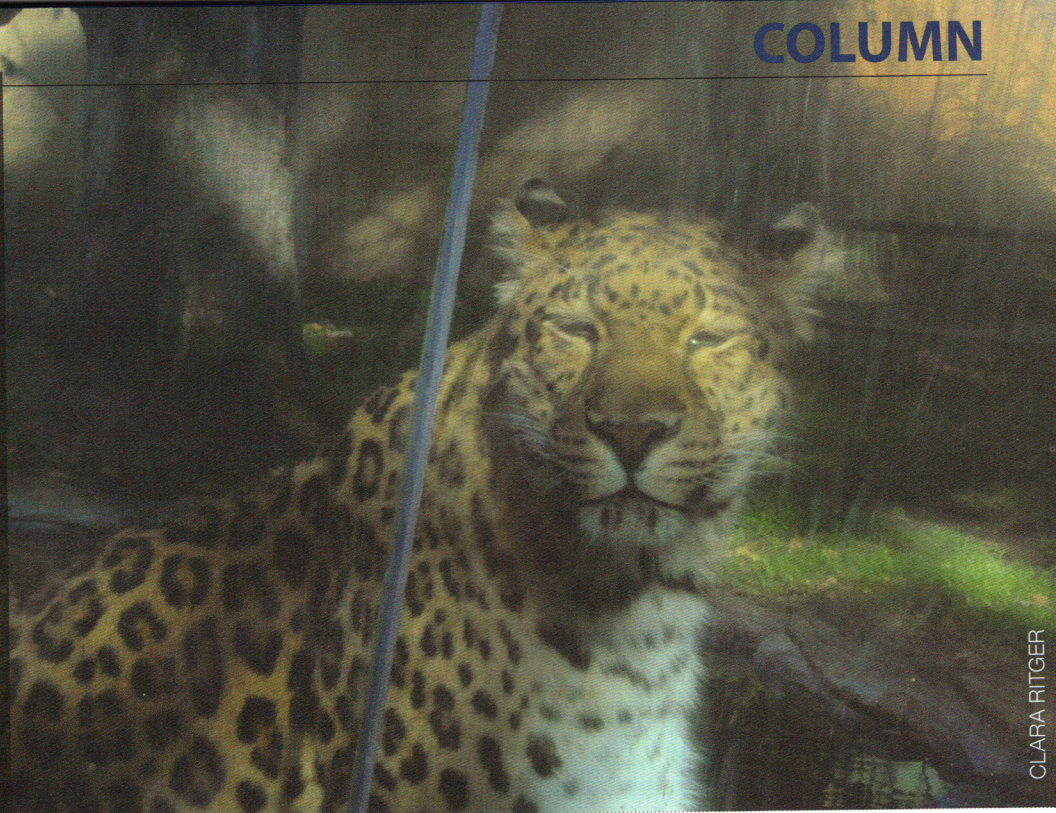


One Fall Day at the Potawatomi Zoo

a column by
Clara Ritger



CLARA RITGER

It probably started when I forgot the carefully printed MapQuest directions at the bottom of a pile of print-quota-destroying class work. I do, after all, go to Notre Dame — God was telling me that this just wasn't the day to go to the zoo. But instead of heeding the advice, my buddy Brandon and I, both California natives, put on our parkas and embarked on a windy, forty-degree expedition that was “One Fall Day at the Potawatomi Zoo.”

Like a few other unfortunate souls, I was abandoned in South Bend to fend for myself over fall break. After I caught up on every TV show that I missed while my head was in the books, I realized that sleeping for 14 hours a day just wasn't going to cut it. So I ventured out into the unknown abyss of South Bend.

Notre Dame students don't often go into the South Bend community. A few weeks ago I met a student at Indiana University South Bend who wasn't terribly keen on meeting me. Greeted with, “Did you get lost because the streets weren't paved with gold on the way in?” I knew I had some hurdles to jump if we were to peacefully coexist, let alone become friends. So I laughed it off and soon enough his animosity turned to surprise as he realized that I “wasn't like most Notre Dame students.” But I think his assumptions — we're “snobby, entitled, superior” — are wrong. I also think that we haven't given anyone the reason to believe otherwise.

We go into the community for two reasons: bar treks or charity work. Those aren't the

two ways we define ourselves, but those are the two aspects of our lives that dictate how the community sees us. We simply don't go off campus for anything else. And, in our defense, why should we? Everything we could possibly want is given to us, right here in our own little postal code heaven.

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“Why do the animals hate us?” I asked Brandon. He shrugged. They didn't hate us; it was just cold and they didn't feel like coming out to play. Except for the leopard, who definitely hated us. It would sit in front of the looking glass, and the minute I walked up to take a picture, it would get up and retreat to its cave. But I looked back when we finally walked away. There it was, back in front of the glass.

Thankfully, the camel was a bit friendlier. It even posed for us and peeked over the wall at its neighbor, which was some sort of mammal that must be endangered because its horns couldn't do squat for its survival. Then the camel stopped posing and started pooping, which I reminded myself over and over again was nothing personal.

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Perceptions. We can't control any but our own. Quick judgments are a shortcut. They may be handy, but they never really get to the heart of the person. When it comes down to it, the attitudes of the South Bend community toward Notre Dame students are not quick judgments. The little pieces of our lives that we've shared with the community have developed over time into a sizeable

misperception that creates a barrier to our peaceful coexistence. But can we change it? I'd like to think so, and I'd like to think that the change starts with getting into the community and finding the heart of it — by going to places like the Potawatomi Zoo.

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The zoo ended up being a pretty fun time. Plenty of animals were still roaming around and the zoo was nearly empty, so we could take our time and wait for them to do something interesting. We saw the monkeys groom each other and we fed the aggressive catfish. They may not be carnivorous but they definitely would be added to the banned pets list in duLac after biting off someone's finger in pursuit of food. If, after reading this article, you're thinking about starting a bucket list of things to do in South Bend before you graduate, don't forget about the zoo. But maybe mark it as a “spring” activity.

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In the car on the way home, we managed to get lost. Alas, no golden roads to lead us home.

The views of this author are not necessarily the views of Scholastic Magazine.