

Keeper Professional Development Program

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From the first moment I saw the giant step out of his crate I was hooked. I had seen rhinoceros before, but never that close and certainty not one that was going to be partially in my care. He was the first rhino our park had the privileged of giving a home to and for all of us working there it was love at first sight. Personally his arrival sent me down a new path in my career that I hope to keep on for a long time.

Since that time a lot has changed, where I live and work, but I am still fortunate enough to be working with rhinoceros every day. Subsequently I'm always looking for more information about rhinos and their care. I often have husbandry questions and until recently I didn't always know where to turn to for help in answering them, so I was ecstatic to find IRKA. It has been great to find an organization of knowledgeable people who have the same passion for these amazing creatures that I do and enjoy sharing what they have learned.

Within a couple of months of joining I attended my first workshop in San Diego and that's where I found out about the Keeper Professional Development Program. As I looked into it more I realized how helpful being able to participate would be. It's a great chance to meet fellow keepers, see what they are doing in their programs, see how different facilities function, and learn as much as possible to take back to my facility. While still at the conference I got in contact with Christine Bobko from the Denver Zoo and asked about going there as part of the program. In October, with much help from Christine and my supervisor I was on my way to Denver to work in their rhino area for three days.

Though they have different species than we do, I felt there would still be a lot of information I could pick up and I was right. Not only did I get to see the layouts of the buildings, yards, and gate systems I got to participate in helping to move the animals through them. I was able to compare diets and get some great ideas for possible new ingredients to try. Also I had a chance to see different kinds of equipment and how they operate. One of the highlights was the opportunity to help with an enrichment project, hanging a street sweeper brush, which got me excited to get something similar up at my facility.

Overall it was fantastic. The staff was welcoming, friendly, and professional. They really went out of their way to show me a lot and answer my constant questions. I can't say enough good things about the Keeper Professional Development Program. It is a great opportunity that we are lucky to have. I know many keepers working with different animals that would love a similar program, but they don't exist. Thank you to IRKA for creating the program and thank you to everyone in Denver for the great experience.

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Photo by : Denver Zoo

