Two Programs at Maritime Aquarium Get National Recognition

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Categories : [Maritime Aquarium](#)

Tagged as : [Accessibility for All](#), [Conversation 2 Conservation 2019](#)

Date : September 15, 2019

The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk's interpretive training program for volunteers and its county-wide effort to support guests with special needs are being celebrated as two of the top initiatives of any zoo and aquarium in America.

— an announcement from [the Maritime Aquarium](#)

The Maritime Aquarium's "Conversation 2 Conservation" training program and its "Accessibility for All" effort were among the top honorees during the national conference of the Association of Zoos & Aquariums this week in New Orleans.

The AZA is the organization that sets the top standards for animal care and guest safety at North American zoos and aquariums. Currently, only 236 institutions meet the strict criteria for AZA acceditation.

Both of the Maritime Aquarium programs receiving 2019 AZA awards were initiatives of the Aquarium's Education department.

"Both of these awards provide recognition for innovative steps we are taking to serve Aquarium guests in exciting new ways," said Tom Naiman, director of Education.

"Our mission to protect Long Island Sound rests on the compelling experiences that bring people face to face and heart to heart with the animals in our care," he said. "Both of these programs are critical to our efforts to make an Aquarium visit a meaningful and transformative experience for every single one of our guests."

Recognized: Conversation 2 Conservation

"Conversation 2 Conservation" received the AZA's Volunteer Engagement Award, which recognizes achievement in volunteer-program development and the ability to engage volunteers in the overall mission and operation of an organization.

"Conversation 2 Conservation" was initiated in June 2018 to assess the Aquarium's volunteers' communication and engagements with guests, and then to implement new best practices in interpretive techniques to more effectively present animal information and conservation messaging.

Between October 2018 and May 2019, all 215 active volunteers completed the new training, and the Aquarium now is using new assessment tools to maintain its high level of volunteer-guest engagement.

The work was led by Ann Marie Lisi, the Aquarium's associate director of Education who also is a certified interpretive trainer and director for the National Association for Interpretation's Northeast Region; Lisa Slinsky, the Aquarium's assistant director of Volunteers & Community Service; and Jim Dauterman, supervisor of Floor Programs.

Also Recognized: Accessibility for All

The Maritime Aquarium's "Accessibility for All" received the AZA's Angela Peterson Excellence in Diversity Award, which recognizes the most significant innovative, productive and far-reaching program to promote diversity in institutions throughout AZA.

Through "Accessibility for All," the Aquarium brought together the 11 top attractions in Fairfield County with the goal of making visits at each more meaningful and less challenging for guests with special needs.

The Maritime Aquarium hosted staff members of the attractions in workshops and training sessions, and also created [a website](#) where guests with special needs can easily learn about events and accommodations at each facility.

"Accessibility for All" launched in April after a year of work led by Naiman and Bonnie Newman, the aquarium's accessibility coordinator. Funding was provided by a grant from Fairfield County's Community Foundation.

This isn't the first time The Maritime Aquarium's Education department has received a top AZA award. The Aquarium's STEM-focused after-school program for Norwalk high-school students — TeMPEST — was recognized in 2016 as one of the top educational achievements by any zoo or aquarium.

- Learn more about all of the aquarium's programs, exhibits, upcoming events and more at [the Maritime Aquarium website](#).