

First-graders delight when a penguin comes to visit

By Philip Sean Curran
Staff Writer

First-grader Hanna Lee reacted the way most people would if they saw a short penguin waddle past them.

She thought it was funny, a reaction 73 other first-graders at Clinton Elementary School in Maplewood had Monday for their exotic visitor.

"Kapuki," a 2-year-old female, stood all of calf-high, but she was a giant hit with the children who watched her shimmy on the auditorium stage.

A Clinton teacher helped make Kapuki's visit possible.

First-grade teacher Jennifer Motz arranged through a New Jersey-based aquarium to have the penguin visit the school. Motz, who teaches her class about penguins, found Jenkinson's Aquarium on the Internet.

The aquarium, located in Point Pleasant, has an education outreach to schools. This was the first time it had come to South Orange-Maplewood.

Motz knew for months that the penguin would be coming but kept the fact a secret from her class. Toward

the end of February, she broke the news to them.

Ever since, the expectation had been building.

"They've been busting for this day to come," Motz said.

In honor of the special guest, first-graders and teachers dressed in black and white.

Taking up the first four rows of the auditorium, they listened to an expert talk about penguins and Kapuki, an African penguin.

"She does not like the very, very cold weather," said Sarah Guaracini, a Maplewood native who works for the aquarium as an assistant curator for education.

Kapuki was still in her kennel while Guaracini spoke.

Later, she brought the bird out to the delight of her young audience.

"I think she's shy," one girl called out from the crowd.

Kapuki weighs between 5½ and 6½ pounds and stands no more than 2 feet tall. She did not require any special transportation to move her from one site to another.

The children were not allowed to touch the penguin or come too close. Guaracini held the bird in her arms for a time before letting it walk on the stage.

She kept a close eye on bird, who walked from one end of the stage to the other. She became a mini-celebrity, later posing with some children for a photo.

Afterward, Guaracini said penguins have become more popular in the wake of penguin-themed movies such as "Happy Feet."

Judging by the children's reaction, that was true and then some.

Some children gave a first-grader's giggle as Kapuki took the stage. They could hear her nails touch the wood as she waddled.

Monday was a day of firsts for some.

First-grader Thomas Dandino said he had never seen a penguin in "real life" before. He expected Kapuki was going to be taller.

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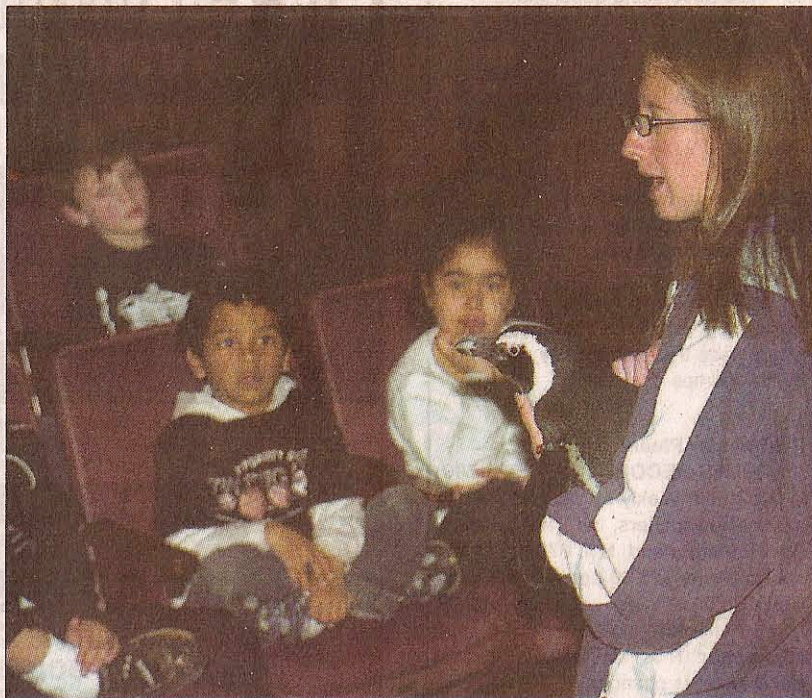


Photo By Barbara Kokkalis

Sarah Guaracini, a Maplewood native who works for the aquarium as an assistant curator for education, talks about penguins to first-graders at Clinton School while holding Kapuki.