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"Ding" Darling Wildlife Society - Friends of the Refuge

PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release

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Caption: The refuge's latest resident volunteers, Kaela Hamilton and Ross Feilhauer will assist the WoW education team.

'Ding' Darling resident volunteers arrive from Broadway to assist WoW education team

After a cross-county RV tour from California and through the Dakotas, Ross Feilhauer and Kaela Hamilton arrived at J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island last week to begin their detail as education volunteers for the Wildlife on Wheels (WoW) urban mobile classroom. They are part of a resident volunteer program that sets up volunteers with recreational vehicle parking and hook-ups at the refuge in exchange for their on-the-job hours.

In northern California, the couple was working their first resident volunteer gig at Calaveras Big Trees State Park. After COVID shut down their work on Broadway in New York, Feilhauer and Hamilton purchased an RV to restore and flip, but eventually hit the road when lockdown continued.

The two met on Broadway. Hamilton most recently was working on video for Alanis Morissette's Broadway musical *Jagged Little Pill*, and building props for Cirque Du Soleil's *Drawn to Life* creation in Orlando.

"I've been lucky enough to work on shows ranging from the Grammys and Oscars, to years of the Cirque du Soleil crazy circus life," she said. "Normally Ross works on special effects, pyrotechnics, and lighting

on *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* on Broadway. He's been working on Broadway for eight years now, with productions such as *Aladdin*, *Hamilton*, and *Lion King*.”

They welcome the quieter, slower pace here and are looking forward to sharing their love of the outdoors and impacting families to want to interact with nature, says Hamilton. Having grown up in the Sarasota-Bradenton area and visited Sanibel and the refuge often, she is looking forward to sharing those memories with Feilhauer, who grew up exploring caves and creeks in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Already the two are astounded by the abundance of wildlife at “Ding” Darling. “Even just setting up our RV, we had multiple critters curiously checking us out,” said Hamilton.

She and Feilhauer will be assisting the WoW education team with its visits across five counties on a mission to reach underserved schools and other venues where kids and adults are unable to visit the refuge.

“We’re bringing the refuge to them,” said Supervisory Refuge Ranger Toni Westland, who oversees the project with Sierra Hoisington, development officer for the “Ding” Darling Wildlife Society-Friends of the Refuge (DDWS).

The nonprofit refuge support group continues to raise funding for the building, staffing, and deployment of WoW. It plans to debut the outreach vehicle in early November. Staff, with assistance from Lee County School District educators, has designed interactive exhibits and curriculum to meet Sunshine State and STEM standards.

DDWS has employed two Spanish bilingual interpretation interns and will be hiring an Urban Education Leader to oversee WoW’s scheduling and educational efforts. The DDWS team will work in partnership with a district educator to optimize the value of the WoW experience for teachers and students alike.

Anyone wishing to help support WoW’s efforts to bring the nature cure to schools, libraries, and events in the region, please contact DDWS executive director Birgie Miller at 239-472-1100 ext. 232.

ABOUT DDWS

As a non-profit 501(c)3 organization, DDWS works to support J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge’s mission of conservation, wildlife and habitat protection, research, and public education through charitable donations and Refuge Nature Shop profits.



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To support DDWS and the refuge with a tax-deductible gift, visit dingdarlingsociety.org or contact Birgie Miller at 239-472-1100 ext. 4 or director@dingdarlingsociety.org.

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