

# Transforming Donors into Partners

[aza.org/transforming-donors-into-partners](https://aza.org/transforming-donors-into-partners)

By Lani McWilliams

In March 2019, staff at Audubon Nature Institute in New Orleans, La., met with a team of architects to dream of the next phase of Africa at Audubon Zoo. Not long into the meeting, the lead architect interjected with, “We’ve heard from your CEO and several staff about the kids next door. We fully understand that we need to think about incorporating views for Children’s Hospital patients into any new giraffe habitat.”

As Audubon Zoo’s next-door neighbor in Uptown New Orleans, Children’s Hospital New Orleans is now a primary audience we consider in internal discussions ranging from inclusion, to guest experiences, to mission integration in visitation-driving initiatives, to habitat design. The vice presidents of development for both organizations speak frankly about goals, needs, cross-over, and opportunities to collaborate and leverage both our missions and brands.

Children’s Hospital is a not-for-profit pediatric medical center—the only full-service hospital exclusively for children in Louisiana and the Gulf South. For more than 20 years, Children’s Hospital and Audubon Zoo have partnered on “Boo at the Zoo,” a safe, spooky trick-or-treat fundraiser to benefit both non-profit organizations. Held on Zoo grounds, the event is planned and produced jointly by both organizations’ marketing teams. It is a successful event sponsorship, and we could have stopped there.

In 2017, John R. Nickens IV, the Hospital’s new president and chief executive officer, arrived with a vision to shift from being a destination for sick children to a key partner in childhood and wellness journeys.

“We’re completely reshaping the way we think about child health,” said Nickens. “We are excited to challenge the typical framework of healing sick children to a more proactive focus on the overall well-being of children, and part of that focus is a commitment to work with community partners, like Audubon, that also recognize that healthy children make healthy communities.”

When the two chief executive officers discovered their shared passion for empowering children and creating healthy, happy childhood memories, they founded a partnership based on shared goals. Each gave their development and marketing teams a single directive: “Work together and dream bigger. Talk about everything we can do to improve the lives of children.”

The questions we needed to ask ourselves were clear: “How do we embrace the children next door who can’t easily enjoy a Zoo visit? What can we do to contribute to their healing? To support their families?”

Today, we’re finding opportunities to give patients and their families early access to the Zoo and special animal encounters, such as private giraffe feedings. “Boo at the Zoo” is still going strong, and Children’s Hospital and its partner facility, Touro Infirmery, have served as the presenting sponsors of the Zoo’s beloved Mother’s Day Celebration since 2018.

We’ve begun a new New Orleans tradition with an ambitious holiday extravaganza that debuted in 2018, Audubon Zoo Lights presented by Children’s Hospital, where guests have the opportunity to purchase gifts (selected by the Hospital’s Child Life Services team) for Children’s Hospital patients.

And, we provide memberships to the residents of Hogs House, their on-campus residential facility for families who live outside New Orleans and have a child receiving ongoing care.

“We often talk about what we can do to make a great city an even greater place to live, work, and raise a family,” said Audubon Nature Institute President and Chief Executive Officer, L. Ronald Forman. “Partners can amplify your message and carry your mission to audiences you may not have reached without them. By dreaming together, you can embark on projects that are creative, impactful, and unique. With so much competition for dollars, attention, and visitation, partnerships are invaluable in moving beyond transactional sponsorships to deeper and more meaningful results.”

Across town at the Superdome, when Gayle and Tom Benson, owners of the New Orleans Saints football team and longtime Audubon supporters, acquired an NBA basketball team, Gayle had definite thoughts about the new team name.

As New Orleanians, the Bensons understood both the unique qualities of Louisiana’s state bird and the need to educate upcoming generations about the imminent crisis facing our Louisiana wetlands. In 2013, the Bensons approached Audubon Nature Institute to ask, “How do we partner? How do we create a funding stream for wetlands education?”

Today, the New Orleans Pelicans are the presenting sponsor of the Silent Auction at Hancock Whitney Zoo-To-Do, Audubon Zoo’s signature gala now in its 42nd year, providing luxury items and priceless fan experiences for bid. These coveted items bring in more than \$100,000 annually for wetlands education on Zoo grounds and in community initiatives.

Support from the New Orleans Pelicans partnership made it possible for Audubon Zoo to renovate and reopen a building in the Louisiana Swamp exhibit as The Pelicans’ Nest. An interactive water table, biofact carts, animal encounters, and other educational tools bring lessons to life for guests

Partnership funds also power the Wetland Express outreach vehicle, which carries wetlands education curriculum to schools, libraries, community centers, and other community hubs, to reach audiences for whom a Zoo visit may not be within reach.

In 2015, the Pelicans approached Audubon with the concept of a children’s book. How better to reach children across the state and even nationwide? “Petit Pierre and the Floating Marsh” was published in 2016 and two copies were gifted to every public library in Louisiana. It was also chosen to represent Louisiana as our state book at the 2016 National Book Fair in Washington, D.C.

The common denominator in both Children’s Hospital and the New Orleans Pelicans partnerships is a willingness to find commonalities in seemingly unrelated missions and leverage respective strengths to further shared goals and values. At the heart of our shared goals is improving the quality of life of our community. The time when zoos and aquariums relied on facility visitors to share their message has passed, and now, it is time for us to forge new relationships with other organizations to find innovative ways to achieve our goals and share our message.

*Request a complimentary copy of “Petit Pierre and the Floating Marsh” for your education department at [Give@AudubonInstitute.org](mailto:Give@AudubonInstitute.org).*

*Lani McWilliams is the vice president of advancement at the Audubon Nature Institute.*