

SeaWorld gives interview to Mequon student

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Mequon — When fifth-grader Sydney Feucht was able to see an orca in person for the first time at SeaWorld, she said it was “cool.”

What wasn’t cool to her is they were stuck in tanks, and even though it was a memorable experience to see them up close, she wished they were free in the ocean. That was the basis of an article Feucht wrote for an inquiry-based learning paper at her school, even getting an interview at SeaWorld.

“I was so into it,” she said, smiling. “I got so passionate.”

Feucht spent a lot of time delving deep into information on orcas for the paper. She said the whole family got involved, but she did most of the research herself. Her biggest source of information was from the documentary film *Blackfish*, released in 2013. Feucht said it was hard watching it as it was very detailed.

A somewhat controversial documentary, *Blackfish* “tells the story of Tilikum, a performing killer whale that killed several people while in captivity,” according to the official website. Its goal was to “explore the creature’s extraordinary nature, the species’ cruel treatment in captivity, the lives and losses of the trainers and the pressures brought to bear by the multi-billion dollar sea-park industry.”

SeaWorld has talked about the film, calling it “inaccurate and misleading,” according to an ABC News story in July 2013.

After seeing the film and doing other research, Feucht still had some questions. Enlisting the help of her mother, Heidi Feucht, Sydney ended up getting an interview with the Director of Animal Trainers at SeaWorld Orlando, Kelly Flaherty Clark. The family was vacationing in Orlando and the interview came just in time before they had to leave.

The interview

Both Sydney and her mother said Clark knew SeaWorld trainer Dawn Brancheau, who was killed by Tilikum in 2010 when he



Submitted photo

SeaWorld’s Director of Animal Trainers Kelly Flaherty Clark (left) poses with Sydney Feucht with an orca jumping in the background.

pulled her into his tank.

“Ms. Clark’s passion and commitment was evident as soon as she began to speak,” Sydney wrote in her paper.

In the interview, Sydney said she found out orcas are no longer going to be used in shows, which she thought is good because they are “stressed being in shows.” Instead, orca education will be done at SeaWorld.

“Beginning in 2017, SeaWorld will still keep their current orcas in their parks, but these orcas will not be used to entertain guests in shows. Instead, SeaWorld will focus on educating the public about the orcas and their natural behaviors,” Sydney wrote in her article.

Still wanting them set free, Sydney posed a few suggestions to Clark based off her research. One solution included the use of “sea pods,” which give a larger blocked off area of ocean. However, Clark said that because the orcas had gotten so used to the fresh water in

their enclosures, the pollution in the ocean would be too much for the whales.

Sydney said Clark told her this is the last generation of orcas at SeaWorld.

The research process

Sydney did a good amount of research outside of *Blackfish* and the SeaWorld interview. She said she “kind of got into it.” Some of the biggest challenges she faced included reading the same things over and over as well as it being “hard to see what’s true and what was false.” Overall, though, she said it was “kind of fun.”

Heidi Feucht said one of the hardest things to get a child to do is edit, but Sydney edited her paper at least a dozen times. After all the research and the interview, she closed out her paper with her final opinion.

“But even after the interview, my heart and mind still tells me that orcas should not be kept in

captivity,” Sydney writes. “Orcas should be free to live in their natural environment, where they can swim for miles, challenge themselves as they hunt for their prey, and explore the large ocean.”

Since writing the paper, the family has even gotten rid of their Zoo Pass because Sydney doesn’t believe any animals should be kept in any kind of enclosure, Heidi Feucht said.

Learning process

Many schools are “looking for more powerful forms of learning” than just lecturing students, Heidi Feucht, a teacher herself, said. She

said this method allows children to pick their own topic and get more involved. As the project goes on, students are managed through various means — one of which is posing questions to them about their topic for them to research. “It gets parents involved,” Heidi Feucht said.

The method goes by many names, including inquiry-based learning, authentic learning, or student-managed learning, to name a few. Future topics Sydney said she may look into include guinea pigs, lice, and how swimmers in Hawaii can hurt sleeping dolphins.



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