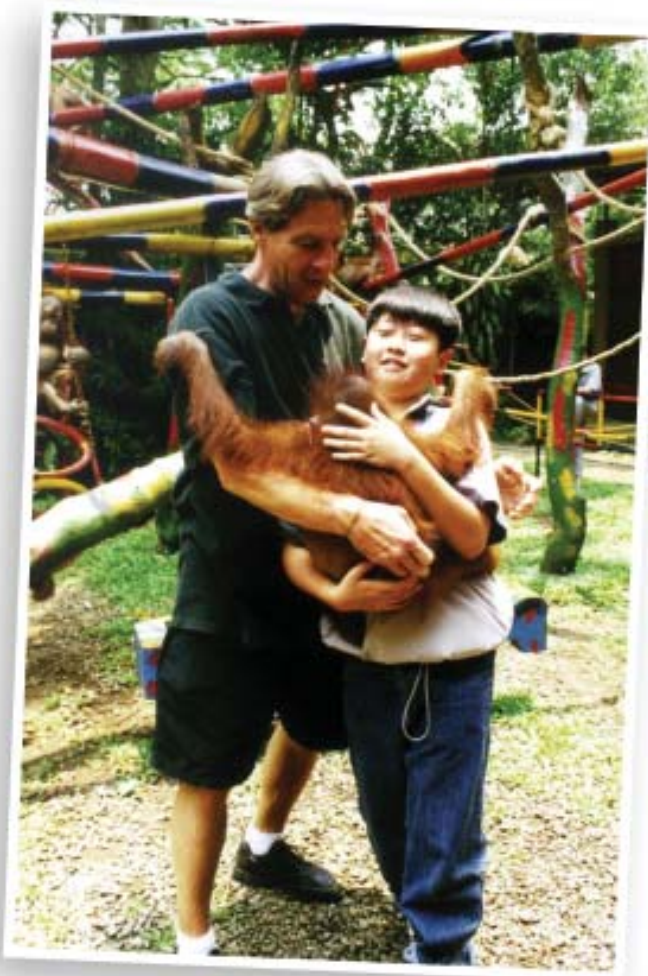


The Middle School Orangutan Project

From the book **JIS: The First 50 Years**, published in 2002



Rob Weber enjoyed visits with the orangutans at Ragunan Zoo almost as much as the students.

The plight of the orangutans of Indonesia is one of the saddest tales of wildlife exploitation to be found. These beautiful, sensitive creatures, who like nothing more than peacefully chomping durian fruit in the forests of Sumatra and Kalimantan, are stolen from their natural environment by rogue wildlife traders and sold into lives of unspeakable misery. The end destination of these captured animals is often a cramped cage in the backyard of a wealthy individual's home, where they are displayed as a symbol of power and prestige. Sadly many die on the journey from their natural homes, but fortunately some are intercepted and sent to places which genuinely care about their plight.

Middle School teacher Rob Weber heard of orangutans while living in Australia. When he took a position as a fifth grade teacher at JIS in 1993 he was determined to make their acquaintance in their homeland. He tracked down Ulriche von Mengden, a Dutch lady at Ragunan Zoo in Jakarta, who was deeply involved with the animals. Ulriche works tirelessly to care for and rehabilitate illegally captured orangutans and other primates. Some of those in her care are prepared for a return to their forest homes while those who have been in captivity for too long are simply given a home where they are loved.

Rob Weber paid Ulriche a visit and immediately fell under the spell of the orangutans in her care. In 1994 Rob took his fifth grade class to the zoo and so began a relationship between JIS students and the orangutans of Indonesia. This initial visit was followed by another visit with Rob's sixth grade students in 1996. These visits enabled students to really connect with these powerful and emotional creatures in a way which is beyond the scope of even the most realistic nature documentary.

Each year the project has grown and the commitment to tackling an environmental concern, that of illegal trade in wildlife species, has given our students opportunities to really do something of value for their planet. In 1996 Rob and the other Middle School Learning Community

Two (LC 2) teachers organized the first 'Orang-a-Walk' which has now become an annual event. The students go and meet the orangutans prior to the commencement of their sponsorship drive and then walk as far as they can in a morning to raise funds for the project. It is the commitment of the students of LC 2 and their teachers' enthusiasm which has helped sustain the valuable work of Ulriche Mengden throughout the lengthy and severe economic crisis.

The JIS community, including parents, students, teachers and corporate sponsors have embraced 'Orang-a-Walk' and from the simple seed of an idea to help these innocent creatures has grown a project which supplies the orangutans at Ragunan Zoo with food, medicine and other necessary equipment. An endowment fund has been started and the interest from that fund is disbursed on a weekly basis to provide more than half the fresh fruit and vegetables the animals consume each week. An annual 'Dancow Drive' also provides powdered milk for the younger primates at the zoo. The next part of the project is to provide funds for an Indonesian student who is interested in zoology, particularly primatology, to attend university and gain qualifications which will help better plan the future of this endangered species.

For those who have visited the orangutans at Ragunan Zoo, from our students and their parents or grandparents, to the official visitors to JIS such as visiting authors or other dignitaries, the shared response to that experience is one of hope. The orangutans in their modest way have taught many a child and many an adult a new lesson. It is unimaginable that we could stand by while these beautiful animals are reduced to extinction. Humankind must rally around the remaining species on our planet – a commitment which Rob Weber and JIS students have already demonstrated in their work with 'Orang-a-Walk.'

Michael K. Sheridan
Middle School teacher

Rob Weber died after an accident in Malaysia last June. Please see the In Memoriam section.

— JIS: The First 50 Years, was written, edited and produced by Jane James and Will Woodruff



Rob (left) with Ulriche von Mengden and Michael Knott at the Middle School for a presentation on orangutans in the 1990s.

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Middle School students enjoying a break during an Orang-a-Walk on the Cilindak campus.