



Fairyland offers a childlike kingdom

May 19, 2007

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PUDDLES THE DUCK is having a great spring.

Puddles and his sidekick, Buddy, are the resident ducks at Children's Fairyland in Oakland. They usually have the run of the park, but every spring the wild ducks at Lake Merritt land on the Merry Meadow and chase poor Puddles and Buddy back into their duck house.

But not this year. As soon as the interlopers landed, Puddles and Buddy waddled menacingly up to them and chased them away.

Now the two ducks are free to do what they love most: gaze for hours at their reflections in the funhouse mirror on the Humpty Dumpty Wall.

Bobo the sheep also is doing well. He has a new sandbox to stand in to ease the stress on his arthritic knees.

Like most of the animals in the petting zoo, Bobo has lived far beyond his normal lifespan, thanks to all the TLC he gets from animal attendant Yvonne Backman and her band of volunteers.

In fact, the whole park has gotten a face-lift. Willie the Whale has been repainted, and the bottom of his pond has been raised for safety and water conservation. Ditto for Noah's Ark, the Merry Miller and the duck pond.

The Alice in Wonderland Tunnel has been completely restored. All the figures have been repainted. And the Caucus Race wheel, which hasn't been operational in 15 years, is working again.

So is the Bubble Elf, who is blowing bubbles again. The Three Men in a Tub have a new tub, the Owl and the Pussycat have a new boat, and the Thumbelina Tunnel has been completely transformed and renamed. It's now the Fairy Music Farm, featuring whimsically designed, handmade instruments -- including chimes, bongos, harps and marimbas -- that the children can play themselves.

"We wanted this place to sparkle," says Executive Director C.J. Hirschfield, and sparkle it does. Nurseryman Arthur Navlet and Oakland parks Superintendent William Penn Mott, the two visionaries who created Fairyland in 1948, would be proud.

A lot of the credit goes to Ann Hyde, former operations manager for Oakland's building department, who took early retirement so she could come to work at Fairyland for a fraction of her former salary. Hirschfield has a similar story: She quit a big bucks job in the cable TV industry to work at Fairyland for a song. And they both say they've never been happier.

"How could I pass up the opportunity?" says Hyde. "I'd give up anything to work here, and I still feel that way."

The reason is that when you spend all day with children, you start to see the world as they do. After a while, the events in a duck's life seem as important as, say, the events in George W. Bush's.

When Puddles and Buddy chased the wild ducks off, everyone in the park started giving each other high-fives.

Hirschfield calls it "the Fairyland spirit," and you can feel it everywhere.

Fairyland is a quieter, gentler, slower place than the rest of the world. Everything is scaled down to the size and sensibility of a child.

It's a world we mostly forget after we grow up, and we don't encounter it again until we reach old age and remember what's really important.

If you'd like to check out the place for yourself, you'll need a child to chaperone you. Just as no child is admitted without an adult, no adult is admitted without a child.

Except for once a year, at Fairyland's annual fundraising gala. This year's event is June 7 from 7 to 10 p.m. There will be stilt walkers, jugglers, tons of gourmet food and, of course, the Children's Fairyland Storybook Personalities. For more information, visit <http://www.fairyland.org> .

A word of advice, though: If you sit on a bench, Puddles might jump up on your lap. It's very cute, but don't let him stay there very long. They don't call him Puddles for nothing.