

Hitchin' a Ride

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When Louie and Terri Valenti planned their recent family trip to Graceland in Memphis, Tennessee, they never anticipated who would be hitching a ride with them. They left on October 18th accompanied by 63 monarch butterflies from Village Oaks Elementary School. The butterflies were carefully protected during the long ride by their daughters, second-grader Mattea and her older sister Daniella.

How these butterflies ended up traveling south with the Valentis was due to some creative problem solving on the part of Village Oaks staff member Jane Funfgeld. She has been the coordinator of the school's monarch butterfly raising project for several years. Her mother, a teacher as well, had raised monarchs for her own students back in the 1980s. "We used to go out into the fields and look under milkweed leaves searching for caterpillar eggs." Funfgeld says.

No longer combing fields and searching under every leaf, Funfgeld placed an egg order via the internet, and in mid-September, 63 tiny monarch eggs were delivered to the school on two milkweed plants. She divided them up into 21 little cages, one for each classroom. Village Oaks students were then given the opportunity to work as junior entomologists as they observed and researched the complete metamorphosis of the butterfly from egg, to caterpillar, to chrysalis, to adult butterfly.

A problem developed, however, when the time came to release the newly hatched butterflies in mid-October. In previous years, Funfgeld would gather the students on the playground for a "monarch release." They would wave good-bye to the butterflies as they began a westward migration to their winter home in the mountains of Mexico. "Monarchs can fly around 30 miles per day if it's warm and sunny out. But these past few weeks in October have been so cold, we couldn't release them." Funfgeld says.

For several days, while hoping the temperature would warm up, Funfgeld fed and cared for the 63 butterflies every evening. She fed each butterfly one at a time, using a coated paper clip to uncurl its eyelash-thin proboscis (think of a butterfly-sized drinking straw) onto a sugar-water soaked napkin so that it could drink.

"They stayed put while they were eating, but some of the butterflies were getting strong enough to fly, so as soon as they were done they'd start flying around the room. I'd have to catch them and put them back into their cages." Funfgeld laughs.

As days passed, she knew time was running out, and those butterflies needed to get out of Michigan before frost hit if they were going to survive. She began asking fellow staff

members if they knew of any families heading south on vacation. That's how she found out about the Valenti family.

Seven-year-old Mattea Valenti and her family already had their motor home loaded up for the Graceland trip, when Funfgeld contacted them. The Valentis were excited to give the monarchs a head start on their migration. So, she delivered the butterflies the night before they left.

"We left at 4:00 a.m. because we wanted to get the butterflies as close to Tennessee as possible before sundown." says Louie Valenti. "We knew they needed to be released within 24 hours so they could eat."

Driving carefully and avoiding potholes, the family drove southwest, finally stopping next to a cotton field in Arkansas. "As the sun was just dipping down, we pulled out the two butterfly cages. We counted down, lifted the lids, and sent them on their way!" Valenti says. "They all came fluttering out like doves out of a birthday cake! And none of them died."

The family watched as they all headed straight south. He videotaped the entire release process to share with students back at Village Oaks. "It was such a cool experience!" Valenti says.