In the last five years, Dengler has contributed more than 5,000 volunteer hours and is responsible for the restoration and painting of most of the cast specimens in the museum’s Hall of Ancient Life, from the 35-foot-long Saurophaganax to five baby Tenontosaurus skeletons. She also prepares fossils for the museum’s educational programs.

“Everything I do is fun and interesting, even routine stuff,” Dengler says. “I’m doing something that makes a difference—in history. That’s the rewarding part, making a difference.”

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For museum volunteer Sandy Dengler, more than 5,000 hours spent preparing dinosaur skeletons for exhibition are the realization of a lifelong dream. A freelance writer by trade, Dengler became so enthralled by her volunteer work that she is turning her avocation into a vocation by returning to the classroom for an advanced degree in paleontology.
Among all the volunteer positions, those requiring the most time and training are the docents. These unique volunteers spend two to three hours a week for up to 12 weeks in intensive training sessions led by museum staff and curators.

Frank Lawrence, a former docent for the Oklahoma City Zoo and lifetime animal lover, was among the first class of volunteers to complete docent training at the museum. In the last year, Lawrence has spent more than 500 hours guiding museum visitors through the popular Hall of Ancient Life and also doing some fossil preparation in the museum’s paleontology lab.

Lawrence says the highlight of his job is interacting with children. “That is the most wonderful experience—to get a crowd of kids around me and to start talking trivia about dinosaurs. I try to get them to imagine what it would be like to be a dinosaur and have to swallow your food whole because you couldn’t chew it . . . I just love to see their eyes and faces light up when they discover something new.”

Education officer Deborah Kay, who developed exhibits for the Hall of Ancient Life, gives her docent classes homework and reading assignments to prepare them for the variety of questions they will experience.

“They’re learning so much more than what is on the label copy,” Kay says. “They’re learning about the exhibit-development process and a lot of behind-the-scenes things. They have an opportunity to attend lectures and ask questions of all our curators. And they get to rotate through all the collection rooms and to see how artifacts are prepared and stored.”

Since many of the docents do not have a science background, the trainers also lecture on fundamental topics. “We try to give them some appreciation and insight into what we do as scientists,” adds Steve W. Estrop, curator of invertebrate paleontology.

“Without the scientific content, this museum wouldn’t be much different from Disney World.”

Both Kay and W. Estrop are thrilled with the quality of docent volunteers who have attended their classes. “They’re so enthusiastic,” W. Estrop says. “If we continue to get people like this, we’ll be in very good shape for the future.”

The next class of volunteer docents will begin training in the fall. Volunteer applications are available on the museum Web site at www.snomnh.ou.edu or by calling the museum’s volunteer office at 405/325-1652.

“Those more people we can have to assist our guests, the better the volunteer experience will be,” adds H. Hubbard, pointing out that many museums seem to get by with little or no volunteer support. “But that wouldn’t be consistent with our vision. This has to be a warm and friendly place. It’s got to have that Oklahoma feel to it.”