

## Joseph Kchodl, '79: Steward of the Past

June 21, 2016 by Lisa McMahon, MA'09

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Joseph Kchodl, '79, remembers watching *The Wonderful World of Disney* as a child. In one particular episode, Walt Disney stood in front of a forest, with two animatronic dinosaurs behind him. Their realistic movements convinced young Joe that they were alive and inspired a lifelong fascination with all things prehistoric.

Today, PaleoJoe, as he is known, is an award-winning paleontologist, author, and speaker who travels around the country, sharing his love and knowledge of fossils and dinosaurs with adults and children alike.

Joe was 10 when he discovered his first fossil in the Niagara Escarpment near his hometown of Lewiston, N.Y.

“I basically have been doing fossils my whole life,” he says. “There’s a wonderful escarpment that runs through most of the state of New York, and that

escarpment is very fossil rich. One of the first things I found was a prehistoric seashell locked in the rock, and that kind of got me fascinated with fossils and paleontology.”

Joe pursued this passion throughout his years at Niagara, where he earned a degree in education. After graduation, he donated his collection of marine invertebrates to the Schoellkopf Geological Museum in Niagara Falls before being commissioned as an officer in the Army. Following eight years of service, he rekindled his passion and began collecting fossils again, this time in the Finger Lakes region where he now lived. This time, he focused on trilobites, ancient saltwater creatures that lived in the oceans once covering New York, Ohio, and Michigan.

The persona of “PaleoJoe” was born when one of his children’s teachers asked him to give a presentation on fossils and dinosaurs to her class. It was so successful that he was invited back the following year to talk to the entire student body. He continued to speak to schools within that district until he and his family moved to Michigan in 1993.

In Michigan, Joe worked at a local museum while continuing to nurture his passion for paleontology. He conducted “Family Fossil Fun” programs across the state and developed that curriculum into an ongoing series for a local TV station, which ran for 14 episodes and earned him recognition in the Philo T. Farnsworth Video Competition.

Fourteen years ago, Joe decided to make “PaleoJoe” a full-time venture. Since then, he has taught programs at schools, universities, museums, corporate centers, church groups, nature centers, and libraries across a number of states. He has also been a featured speaker at Rock and Mineral Society meetings and at the Greater Detroit Rock and Mineral Exposition. In 2001, he was honored with the Paleontological Research Institution’s Katherine Palmer Award for his contributions to the field.

In addition to his speaking engagements, Joe travels extensively across the U.S. to lead and participate in digs, often with famed paleontologists including Dr.

Robert T. Bakker and Dr. Michael Voorhies. He has also participated in a dig in the Czech Republic. Some of his most notable finds include the ribs of an 11-million-year-old rhinoceros, the bones of a Triceratops, and the remains of two long-necked dinosaurs: a Camarasaurus and an Apatosaurus. Among his favorite discoveries, he says, are dalmanites trilobites that he found in pyrite (also called fool's gold) in Middleport, N.Y., last year.

Having collected fossils for nearly 50 years, Joe has amassed a collection that numbers around 10,000. He has donated many of them to museums, including the Czech National Museum, and created three traveling exhibitions.

"I've got a prep lab in my basement where I prepare my own fossils," he explains. "I finally had so many that I decided to start creating and curating exhibits, and now my fossils are being displayed all over the country to educate the public."

*Trilobite Treasures: Anthropods of the Ancient Seas* features more than 200 specimens covering five geological periods and is the largest and most comprehensive exhibit of these ancient sea creatures. *Dinosaur Prep-Lab* gives patrons the opportunity to see how the bones of an Edmontosaurus are cleaned, and *Fossils of the Michigan Basin* showcases commonly found fossils such as trilobites, corals, crinoids, gastropods, cephalopods, bryozoans, brachiopods, and primitive placoderm fish.

In 2005, Joe added "published author" to his list of accomplishments. He has written for both adults and children, including a mystery and adventure book series called *PaleoJoe's Dinosaur Detective Club*, which has been optioned by Brandon Street Films to be made into animated movies.

Recently, Joe partnered with Corporate Travel Services to launch fossil adventure trips, educational tours that will enable participants to accompany him on digs and in many cases, keep the fossils they find.

"I've had a very eventful life," Joe says, admitting that he still gets excited whenever he is dealing with fossils. "For me, it's like Christmas every day. You never know what you're going to find."