

Butterfly Magic

I've always had a secret love for butterflies. As a child it wasn't so secretive as my bedroom was filled with them. On the back of my door was a 2 ½' x 2' poster filled with all different kinds; not a single spot of white space to be found. On my ceiling hung six giant butterflies; one of each color of the rainbow. And of course, a butterfly shaped pillow laid on my bed which I could not sleep without. I remember running around as a child, chasing them, hoping I could catch one to be my friend.

When I was in the second grade, each student in my class received a painted lady caterpillar for a project on life cycles. The caterpillars lived in a small plastic container with larvae food for them to munch on. We added twigs and leaves as the caterpillars began to grow. I remember being so fascinated by my caterpillar; I was able to watch it intently as it sat on my desk. I could see its little legs move as it crawled around the container and I swear it listened to me as I told it my secrets.

One day when I went to school, the caterpillar was no longer there; instead I saw a chrysalis hanging from the lid of my container. It stayed this way for what seemed like ever. The teacher told us it was forming its wings and when it was ready, the butterfly would come out. This period of waiting was torture for me. I wanted to see its bright colors and watch it fly away, something I longed to do.

Most of the butterflies hatched over a weekend, so when we came to school on a Monday our butterflies were finishing their last steps before needing to be released. I didn't want to let mine go. I grew fond of this butterfly; it became one of my good friends. However, I did have to let it go. It wasn't meant to stay in a jar for its life. It needed to flutter around and be free; something I could not provide. The day we released my butterfly into the wild was the one of the last days I thought about the wondrous creature.

As I grew up, my room changed as did my love for butterflies. I took down the poster and my butterflies on the ceiling. My pillow went into storage which probably still lies there today. I never really thought about them much again, until I came to college.

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I was dropped off at freshman orientation the summer of 2017. Being from New York, my family stayed at a hotel in Hadley for the few days I was at UMass and explored the area. They found an ice cream parlor located on a farm where you could pet the animals and a

breakfast place that we still cannot figure out the name of it to this day. They also went to a restaurant where my dad was given a salad with some unexpected protein in it (it was a fly). Despite them raving about the ice cream and the best French toast my sister has ever had, the one thing they did that I was jealous I had missed out on was going to a butterfly conservatory. My sister showed me pictures of beautiful butterflies and they all laughed about how one landed on my dad's head and wouldn't let him go. My mom talked about how hot it was in the room but sweating made the butterflies want to land on you more, according to a worker. The worker had even let them hold a cap filled with orange juice which attracted at least ten butterflies at once. I sat listening to their stories of this wondrous place and made a note to myself that I had to go visit it when I officially moved in that September.

The start of freshmen year brought new life challenges. I was being released into a new community in an entire new state. My world was opening up beyond my hometown and the unfamiliar freedom of college made me feel like I was roaming around lost, trying to find my way. I was too preoccupied with discovering new friends, starting my classes, and learning my way around campus to even think about adventuring into town. I was a wide-eyed freshman with so much to do in what felt like little time. If I didn't find my place fast, then I would be an outcast. I spent the fall settling in, but in the spring I was ready. I had my friends, I loved my classes, and I finished exploring around campus. It was time to learn more about the area. As soon as nice weather arrived, a thought to visit the butterflies popped into my head.

My three best friends and I piled into my car for our trip to Magic Wings Butterfly Conservatory & Gardens on a beautiful spring afternoon. Driving down Route 116 for about 10 miles, I binged a left onto Routes 5 and 10. Shortly after, I pulled into the parking lot of Magic Wings, a huge 18,400 square foot facility. The building looked welcoming; it had four eaves painted green with a giant butterfly at each peak. Walking along the sidewalk you pass flourishing green plants in planters and a huge pink sign that reads "24 flavors of soft serve." Already drawn in by the butterflies, I kept thinking about which flavor ice cream I wanted to get.

When we walked inside the main entrance, I was immediately in awe as we saw a room similar to a beautiful greenhouse. The glass ceiling brought in an abundance of natural light for the walls and walls of plants to consume. Six or seven colorful butterfly kites hung from the beams of the ceiling creating the illusion of already being among the creatures' presence. There were round tables for people to sit at to enjoy food from the cafe in the room next door. I

immediately saw a perfect photo op location. Among an array of pink and red flowers was a yellow metal butterfly which had a bench connecting its wings for visitors to sit on. Above the flowers on the wall behind it read "Magic Wings." In addition, across the room was a wooden Monarch butterfly with a hole for the head so children could stick theirs in it for a photo. The child in me was already managing its way to the surface as we only walked a few steps into the building.

I read a sign that said tickets pointing to the gift shop. Entering the gift shop, I saw many things to buy not only for kids but adults too. Of course, there were puzzles and stuffed animals and butterfly nets for children, but there were also gardening tools and books for adults, jewelry, coffee mugs, and other knick-knacks. We walked to the counter and bought discounted student tickets for \$10. The worker had asked if it was our first time visiting, which we said yes, and she explained where to go and some rules for the conservatory.

On the right wall of the gift shop was a door we had to go through in order to get to the butterflies. When we went through this door, we entered a room filled with all different kinds of bugs, frogs, and reptiles. There were two displays: on the left there were tanks filled with different types of bugs sitting on two tables and on the right, there were cages filled with frogs and other reptiles sitting on metal shelves. There were also more exhibits of animals on three of the walls. The fourth wall was the entrance to the conservatory. The entire fourth wall was a picture of the beautiful greenery hiding just beyond the doors. I was excited to get inside, but knew we had to look around this room first. Since I'm not the hugest fan of bugs, I spent most of the time looking at the cute frogs.

Finally, we entered the butterfly conservatory. This 8,000 square foot glass room was filled with butterflies, moths, and tropical vegetation. The room was rather warm, a steady 80 degrees, to keep all the living things inside happy. It was hard not to flinch and dodge all the flying butterflies swarming you. Immediately two of my friends hated it. We didn't spend more than a half hour here because they were so uncomfortable. I tried to admire the room as quickly as possible so we could leave.

When you enter all you see is greens, butterflies, and a pathway to follow. The path to the right leads to a wall of cocoons in a contained glass box so the new butterflies can hatch in peace. The path straight ahead leads you into the vegetation, a sign warning us of "butterfly crossing." This path then diverges again and if you head left you will discover a small bridge

with a koi fishpond underneath and your way back to the door. If you head straight there's a small waterfall that you can sit on a bench and enjoy the sounds. However, if you turn right, there's a huge gazebo which leads to the other side of the room. On this side of the room, there is more than just vegetation and butterflies. You can find a station for workers to bring out birds like parrots or reptiles like a tortoise. These workers will talk about the animals and maybe let you pet the reptile depending on how friendly it is. Also, on this side of the room are lots of benches in an open space. This is the area that receives the most sun, so if visitors sit quietly, a butterfly or two may just land on them.

After our quick visit I knew I had to go back with the right people. I really loved the smell of the air and the calming music they played if you listened intently enough. The atmosphere of the conservatory was so peaceful, however, the friends I brought hindered the experience for me. I almost felt like I had to go alone.

I didn't return to Magic Wings until a little over a year later with my boyfriend. Elementary students still had schooling left so the conservatory was rather quiet that day. As we walked around, we saw elderly people, families with small children, and the occasional photographer alone. Our steps were slow, graceful, and cautious of our surroundings. We walked hand in hand, looking around the room, not feeling the need to speak to one another. The calmness of the new situation allowed me to not just see the scenery around but absorb the sensation and notice the details about each butterfly that caught my eye.

Every butterfly has their own unique characteristic that only a keen eye can observe. If you look really closely, fluttering around is what looks like a dark green butterfly. If you watch it as it lands on the nearest sweet flower to eat, you'll notice that it's not dark green, but instead you can see right through it to the green of the leaves in the background. The glasswing butterfly uses its transparent wings as camouflage from its predators. This power gives the butterfly the most beautiful embellishment: nature itself.

As you continue to walk around, you get this sensation of wanting to dodge a huge black butterfly that has a splash of bright green and red on its wings as it swoops left and right. The Richmond birdwing butterfly's hints of color are specially designed as a warning sign for predators not to eat them for they could be toxic. In the conservatory they may not have much use for this special power, but they do get to take advantage of their strong wings as they fly around the open space. It almost makes you wish you could soar with them.

Some butterflies literally catch your eye when you look at them; you may think their spots are staring right back at you. The owl butterfly uses its powerful “gaze” to scare predators away. The two giant spots on its wings can easily fool anyone into thinking a large animal is hiding in the bushes, not a harmless butterfly. Even though they may not look as pretty, these butterflies make a good friend, however they always win in staring contests.

Over the few hours you roam around, you begin to understand the intricacies of a butterfly’s life. The newfound knowledge of their world makes you appreciate the little instants of magic powers in your own world.

After visiting with my boyfriend, I knew this was going to be somewhere to go when life was hectic and all I need is a break. The final time I went to the conservatory was this past November with my friends from home. We walked around silently and decided to sit on some benches in the sunny, open area. As we sat quietly, I overheard a worker say to a little girl, “if you envision yourself as a flower, and are as still as a flower, then the butterflies like to land on you.” Immediately I tried to envision myself as a still plant, photosynthesizing in the sun; sitting, soaking up the light.

College students don’t always get the time to just sit and not think about a single thing. This little girl probably sat still, her eyes wondering with awe, hoping a butterfly would land on her with all her might. I mean, that’s exactly what I did. I can’t picture the last time I just sat and thought about something so simple. There are always homework assignments that need to get done and friends I need to check on or some random event that will cause me stress until I figure out how to manage it. I’m always thinking two steps ahead. Except when I was in this moment. Here, all I was thinking about was how to be a flower so a butterfly will land on me. Caught up in the alleviation of the moment, I hardly noticed that one was on my shoe. I was so happy, and I was so relaxed. I set my worries free and embraced the feeling of mental freedom.

Every time I go to Magic Wings Butterfly Conservatory & Gardens, I discover a new detail about peace and love for the simple. I don’t ever feel awkward in the silence and I want to sit and soak up the sun for hours whether inside or out in the gardens. The butterflies consume my thoughts and I feel their magic touch providing me relief. I know that the little girl within me comes out each time and thanks me for not forgetting the love that I had for butterflies.