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Take a walk on the wild side: Octagon Wildlife Sanctuary

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KATHY GREY/ FLORIDA WEEKLY This bear came to the sanctuary following years of abuse that resulted in a permanently disfigured jaw.

Discarded lives find solace at Octagon Wildlife Sanctuary and Rehabilitation Center in Punta Gorda. As the name suggests, abused, sick and neglected wildlife are sent to Octagon to be cared for, some for the first time in their lives. Once rehabilitated, the wild animals live out their days in the best environment possible.

Lauri Caron, chairman and manager of Octagon Wildlife Sanctuary works tirelessly to unite inborn freedom with life in captivity.

The volunteers

Grants help to pay operation costs, and the organization runs as lean as any we've seen.

But the backbone of the refuge is a team of more than 30 volunteers who work feverishly to dispense 500-700 pounds of raw meat every day to the carnivores. It takes six hours to feed the herbivores in residence the produce they need to live. These animals are nourished by dedicated volunteers who believe that the work they perform for the animals is worth every ounce of their energy.

Volunteering extends beyond the grounds at Octagon.

Local retailers who have been touched by the lives inside Octagon freeze meat and store food when it would be easier to throw it away. Coral Rock has donated sand to the refuge for about 20 years to keep the animals dry. Not only do retailers such as Target, Sweetbay and Sarasota Inner City Meats contribute, but so do area food banks, loathe to dispose of precious food that still has goodness in it for the animals.

Hands-on volunteers each have an assigned task. "They find us," said Ms. Caron. "They come in on the days they can, and we find out together what suits their comfort levels and strengths." That's how tasks are assigned. "Our volunteers just gravitate toward what they want to do."



KATHY GREY/ FLORIDA WEEKLY A tigress shows her affection for Lauri Caron at Octagon

Each volunteer watches an hour-long DVD about wildlife prior to signing up to volunteer. They learn about which animals are allergic to grapes, for example, and a white board tells them what needs to be done for each animal.

Ron Ramsey of Muse, Fla., just turned 70. Every day, he works at Octagon, checking posted board notices governing each animal's needs. The boards reveal if an animal is sick or irritable, what medications need dispensing and when the last feeding and watering took place.

"He'll go around and check on the animals at about 6 a m.," said Ms. Caron. "He's a godsend to us. All the volunteers bring a part of themselves to this thing," she said.

A volunteer from Estero handles kids' camps, school and scout tours.

But the most dedicated volunteer, without a doubt, is Ms. Caron herself. Aside from attending to the animals, she handles the phones, mail, bills, taxes, sending out thank you notes — and mowing the lawn. "At this point, I still don't get paid. I do some odd jobs to get pocket money. I animal sit and enter items on eBay for sellers," she said.

Ms. Caron is a role model to people who admire heart and soul above wealth and fame. Day in and day out, she administers food, medications and love. She lives for a family of beasts, some whose inherent instincts have been so distorted, they can no longer be deemed natural. Still, they are Ms. Caron's family — and her life. Most of the animals perk up at the sound of her voice and begin nuzzling, squawking or communicating in some way, expressing their undeniable love for her. The sight of it is as beautiful as it is astonishing.

The animals

The animals that live at Octagon are remnants of glories past, having extinguished their usefulness in they eyes of hawkers appealing to the masses and everyday Joes seeking to satisfy a personal ambition to "own" a wild animal. But the animals were not born to submit to humans. They are — and they always will be — wild.

This is the message Ms. Caron delivers unequivocally to every person who sees or comes in contact with the animals at Octagon.

Inside the gates, visitors bear witness to past crimes inflicted upon the animals.

A bear's mandible is permanently disfigured at the hand of a pipe-wielding "trainer." A lioness stumbles along on maimed feet, declawed for the protection of circus employees, but robbed of the cushioning effect the nails play in a lion's proper gait. A monkey named Spike runs restlessly. At some point, he was subjected to a half-lobotomy. Some animals come to Octagon bone-thin and malnourished. Others are morbidly obese — and also malnourished. A bear named Ballou shed 500 pounds after being fed a proper diet for the first time at Octagon. Now he weighs in at a healthy 800 pounds.

At someone else's bidding, they may have died or been euthanized. But rescue workers and volunteer caregivers at Octagon give them a shot life.

How it began

It started many years ago, when a blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl dreamed of a living a life surrounded by animals. Little did she know back then what kind of animals she would be surrounded by. "I knew I'd have to be with animals," Ms. Caron recalls. "But I didn't think it would be this extreme!"

She first heard about Octagon at a church volleyball game in Rockford, Ill. in the late 1980s. "One of the guys said, 'I know you're thinking about moving to Florida. You love animals so much, you've got to see this place called Octagon. It's around I-75. I think they could use you.' So, I drove out and ran into Pete and his mom at the front entrance and I never looked back."

Pete Caron and his father, Omar, founded Octagon 31 years ago. As volunteers with the Punta Gorda Fire Department, they took on the task of finding a place for two bears to live. The bears had been performers in the "Gentle Ben" television series filmed in Florida and were picked up by Florida Fish and Wildlife. That was the beginning.

In 2002, Ms. Caron would become Pete's wife, and three years later, his widow. She lost her father to heart disease. Her mother lost her right breast to cancer. Despite personal loss and tragedy, she continues to move forward on behalf of the wild animals that depend on her. "Pete and I both wanted to make sure the sanctuary would continue," she said.

Why? "Not everyone gets to do something they are completely passionate about. I can't save all the animals in the world, but I'm out here to help that one animal that needs me."

Though Ms. Caron exhibits unending fortitude, she has moments of uncertainty. "There are days that I fight that 'I can't do it' feeling. Most people don't realize how much work goes into the place."

But it's the great moments that make it all worthwhile — among them, the love of rehabilitated animals and the loyalty of volunteers. And so Lauri Caron stays on track, on a mission to help one wild animal at a time. "I guess it's the stubborn Scottish in me," she said.

She also enjoys touring the grounds with the public. "I just have always, in my heart, wanted to do something like this, to give animals a place to go to" — and to make the public a part of it.

Today, Octagon Wildlife Sanctuary encompasses more than 10 acres. It is filled with quirky, recycled art and art pieces created specifically for it. It's filled with animals, of course, and sprawling vegetation. More than anything else, it is filled with love.

It's become a destination for school, church and civic groups. Boy Scouts earn merit badges there. Kids have camp and supervised overnight visits in the compound, sleeping to the sounds of the wild. College students earn credit by writing about the sanctuary and developing marketing plans based on it.

Wild animals — many removed from their native environment, toyed with for people's pleasure and subsequently disposed of — have found a home, thanks to Lauri Caron and the Octagon Wildlife Sanctuary. †