

Octagon wildlife celebrates 30 years in Punta Gorda

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Cinnamon did her step-step-kick routine, which the European brown bear learned in the Moscow circus during the '70s.

Cody, a 900-pound liger -- his father is a lion and his mother was a tiger -- roared for attention while he laid on his bed.

And Spike, an olive baboon, watched his favorite soap operas on a television.

As Lauri Caron, the director and owner of the Octagon Wildlife Sanctuary, made her rounds throughout the Punta Gorda nonprofit organization, Cinnamon, Cody and Spike, along with about 200 other animals at the Octagon Wildlife Sanctuary greeted their familiar caretaker. This year marks the 30th anniversary of the rescue, rehabilitation, learning and conservancy for exotic animals center.

"It's all done out of love," Caron said. "It's a lot of work, but it's rewarding."

Caron first came to the sanctuary as a visitor when she moved to the area 15 years ago from Illinois. After walking through the gates, Caron never left -- she volunteered countless hours for years. And six years ago Caron married Pete, who took over ownership of the sanctuary from his father, Omar. Pete passed away three years ago, and Caron continues running the sanctuary.

"It's like nowhere else," Caron said while a Grizzly bear, Yo Yo, nuzzled the fence near her. "The animals are just amazing. But a lot of people don't know about us. It's a great place to come and be up close and personal with exotic animals."

Octagon primarily gets lions, tigers, bears and other exotic animals from circuses, zoos, animal acts, confiscated animals and other animals in need. Caron said that she receives calls almost daily from Florida Fish and Wildlife and other organizations asking if she can take another animal. From driving up to Alabama to help the neighboring state with a panther lounging in someone's backyard to taking in five adult tigers confiscated by Florida Fish and Wildlife, Caron uses her resources to help the greatest number of animals.

"We do as much as we can," she said. "These (animals) are the ones the zoos wouldn't call perfect, or they tried to hurt other animals, or that no one wants or can't take care of. We have some with sad stories."

Others, like Facers and Bobby -- a servile cat from the Evan Almighty movie -- have stardom. Facers, now an adult tiger, was born at Octagon a couple of months after his mother was confiscated from a man running from the IRS. Facers has been seen by millions of children around the world in animated form -- as Raja the tiger from the Disney movie Aladdin.

"It was a really neat experience," Caron said. "The creators came out here, and then we took him to the studio other times. We still have some of the drawings. It was a huge excitement."

Along with a credit at the end of the movie, Disney gave Octagon a \$385 donation.

"We rely on donations. All the money goes right to the animals," Caron said.

Octagon feeds about 500 pounds of raw meet and a couple of hundred pounds of vegetables a night to the animals. Caron estimated that it costs about \$5,000 to \$8,000 a month to run the sanctuary, and said luckily a lot of the food is donated by Sweetbay and Target stores. There are about 30 volunteers who help care for the animals.

"We have to have donations and an admission fee or we'd close, and I really don't want to do that, but we are getting to that point," Caron said. "A lot of other places like this are closing. It's for the kids and the animals. We want to keep it going."

Caron said Octagon hosts numerous school and camp tours for children, as well as allows the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts to camp at the facilities. They have numerous endangered animals, Caron said, and about 30 tigers, eight bears, primates, cats, foxes and numerous other types of animals.

Octagon has daily enrichment programs for all of their animals, and abides by regulations by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the United States Department of Agriculture, Caron said.

As volunteers pulled breakfast out of the 25,000-pound freezer for the animals, Caron checked on Blizzard, a tiger cub with energy that "lasts all the time" but a birth defect which is causing neurological problems that made her owners give her up.

"We need folks' support to (give the animals a quality life)," Caron said. "It's neat for me to see the excitement of visitors. It sparks that in me and makes it worth it to share something you don't see everyday."