



KAY ROSAIRE

One mile east of I-75 amidst the industrial and commercial businesses is a gated 30-acre refuge for nearly 100 exotic and not-so-exotic animals she founded. As a retired renowned professional animal trainer, her Big Cat Habitat and Gulf Coast Sanctuary provides a permanent safe haven for lions, Bengal and white tigers, bears, bobcats, desert tortoises, emus, peacocks, capuchin monkeys, chimpanzees, parrots, a camel, deer, goats, and turkeys. "As an animal lover, I'm a big believer in the strength of the human-animal relationship. I will always provide a safe haven for animals that have no place to go."

Kay Rosaire with her family (l-r) Ella Marie, Clayton and Danielle Rosaire. "I come from an English family of professional animal trainers. My father was the patriarch of the world-renowned Rosaire circus family and was known for his unique talent in training and communicating with wild animals. I grew up with big cats, lions, and tigers and decided that I wanted to perform with my own tigers," Kay notes.

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One mile east of I-75 and south of Fruitville Road amidst the industrial and commercial businesses is a gated 30-acre refuge for nearly 100 exotic and not-so-exotic animals. Founded by Kay Rosaire, a retired renowned professional animal trainer, the Big Cat Habitat and Gulf Coast Sanctuary provides a permanent safe haven for lions, Bengal and white tigers, ligers (born to a male lion and a female tiger), bears, bobcats, desert tortoises, emus, peacocks, capuchin monkeys, chimpanzees, parrots, a camel, deer, goats, and turkeys.

"I come from an English family of professional animal trainers. My father was the patriarch of the world-renowned Rosaire circus family and was known for his unique talent in training and communicating with wild animals. I grew up with big cats, lions, and tigers and decided that I wanted to perform with my own tigers. Eventually my husband and I brought our animals to the United States. In 1973 a local cowboy bought lions from a New Jersey lion safari park that he was going to auction. I drove over right away and all had been auctioned except three little lion males and one female. They were in poor condition and looked so pathetic. At that time there were no federal regulations, no fish and game rules. I took them to a veterinarian specializing in cats. I truly changed their lives and I believe they loved me for rescuing them. The Big Cat Habitat and Gulf Coast Sanctuary grew from my love of exotic animals."

She adds, "I'm passionate about animals. For me and my volunteers, this is a work of love. All the animals that come to me have a story. Only a very few are abused. In some cases the owner passed away or the owner cannot afford to keep the animal. In the past two years I have received small animals from people who have lost their homes. Some animals come from petting zoos and photo concessions that have gone out of business or the animals have become too large. Many come through referrals from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. I never refuse an animal. We have a network of about six refuges in Florida. There are times that I don't have the space for an animal, but I always say I will take it if no other refuge will...somehow my helpers and I always find a way to accommodate it."

Her life is almost completely centered on the animals. "On weekends, except in the summer, I give educational training demonstrations that are open to the public and display positive reinforcement techniques that I developed. I perform with Nike, a one-year-old African lion and three Bengal tiger cubs. People are missing [seeing] animals. There are very few places where people can see these types of animals other than zoos in large cities. I demonstrate how we train animals with gentle handling, praise, and treats. Our relationship is more than an owner-pet relationship. Since we spend so many hours in training, a bond is developed based on praise and reward, not on punishment. I was one of the first people to do educational lectures at state and county fairs and community events stressing the importance of habitat preservation, extinction, and environmental issues and I continue to this during the shows at the habitat. As an animal welfare advocate, I do not abuse animals. Throughout human history, animals have been a food source, beast of burden, and protector. I believe they should be treated with dignity and respect for their entire lives. It is the morally right thing to do."

Walking through the habitat with Kay provides an up close and personal experience with the menagerie of large and small animals. It is also abundantly clear how much she loves the animals and how much they love her. Touring the building housing the 30 big cats and three cubs, Kay nuzzles up against the face of the animals. She talks to each by name and relates the story of how each one came to her. The habitat structures are built with the animals' needs in mind. The big cats are in large cages with a play and exercise area behind the cages with waterfalls, while ten bears are in large screened areas with waterslides, and the chimpanzees have an air-conditioned and heated house with television, DVD player, and hammocks. All of the animals have husbandry plans with a rotation schedule for play and exercise.

"My son Clayton and his family and I live on the property. During the January cold spell, we and our helpers didn't sleep for four or five nights. We covered the cages with tarps, filled some cages and night houses with hay, brought the animals into their individual habitats, and protected every animal. We cancelled our weekend shows to protect the health and safety of our animals."

Kay is adamant about saving animals. "I'm against euthanasia. There is no such thing as humane euthanasia for young healthy animals. There are less than 500 tigers of all species in the world—they're in imminent danger of extinction. Some species have already vanished. I have five of the eight remaining species of brown and black bears. I would never kill a healthy exotic animal."

She says, "We follow the regulations, standards, and policies established by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) that apply to cage size, security, humane treatment, and sanitary conditions. Personnel from these agencies can come onto the property 24/7 without warrants to check on my animals and compliance with the rules and regulations. A FWC officer once came to inspect on Christmas Eve. Florida's rules and regulations regarding wildlife that pose a significant danger to people are among the strictest in the nation."

Being a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, Kay relies on donations to fund the habitat. With only two paid helpers, she is grateful for the many volunteers, donors, and people who attend her shows and the major fundraiser "A Night in the Wild."

One donor enlarged the training barn/arena and added bleachers for the shows. Dr. Anne Chauvet (who would like to build and equip a clinic at the habitat) and Dr. Bill McGinty provide veterinary services including surgery for the animals. Whole Foods, Sweetbay, and more recently Publix donate produce, meat, chicken, and bakery goods that would otherwise be thrown away. Kay points to recent projects that have been completed by area construction workers who donate their time to build needed facilities such as a water misting system for the petting zoo for use during the hot weather and waterslides for the bears.

The tour concludes with the small Capuchin monkeys jumping around in their cage and screeching for Kay's attention when she comes into sight. She chokes up and says, "As an animal lover, I'm a big believer in the strength of the human-animal relationship. I will always provide a safe haven for animals that have no place to go." 🐾

Story: Carol Darling
Image: Evelyn England