



RESCUE MISSION

More than thirty lions and tigers
reside at the **Big Cat Habitat and
Gulf Coast Sanctuary.**

PHOTO BY DEREK DAMMANN



Like many Florida residents, the tigers at the habitat enjoy spending time in their swimming pool.

A Sarasota sanctuary provides shelter for exotic animals in need of a home

by Beth Luberecki

For Kay Rosaire, it all began with a cross-eyed lion. An eighth-generation member of a famed English family of animal trainers, Rosaire spent most of her life around animals both famous (Gentle Ben the Bear) and not. But it was caring for Clarence the Cross-Eyed Lion, star of a 1965 film and 1966-69 television series, that got her “hooked on cats.”

Rosaire now boasts more than thirty years of experience working with lions, tigers, and other exotic animals, and she shares her passion for the wild kingdom at Sarasota’s Big Cat Habitat and Gulf Coast Sanctuary, which she founded in 1987. Each weekend from around October to May, the nonprofit sanctuary opens its doors and allows the public to get a closer look at its animal residents.

Rosaire learned about caring for exotic animals from her late father, Derrick, a well-known trainer and performer who appeared everywhere from the White House and Las Vegas to the Calgary Stampede and “The Ed Sullivan Show.” “He always loved animals,” says his daughter. “He always had a menagerie, a collection of all kinds of animals. He was a big animal advocate, and he didn’t call it training animals, he called it teaching. He was one of the first people who worked with positive reinforcement.”

At the Big Cat Habitat, Rosaire oversees quite a menagerie herself these days. She opened the sanctuary to rescue lions, tigers, and other animals—most of which were born in captivity—in need of a permanent home.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BIG CAT HABITAT





Rosaire jokingly calls the cats at the habitat “the original couch potatoes,” as they sleep eighteen to twenty hours each day.

Today, more than thirty tigers and lions reside here, along with ten bears, a camel, a llama, and a host of other animals. Rosaire has great respect for the wildlife under her roof and strives to give them all a good home. “We are animal welfare advocates,” she says. “Some animal rights groups believe that exotic animals only belong in the wild, and any that can’t be returned should be euthanized. We believe animals should never be abused or neglected in any way. They should have as good a quality of life as possible, and they have the right to live.”

The cats spend a lot of their time at the habitat simply relaxing, since they sleep for eighteen to twenty hours each day. “They’re the original couch potatoes,” laughs Rosaire. The lions have access to the indoors and outdoors at all times, so they can choose to be in their dens or outside whenever the mood strikes. The tigers spend two or three hours outside each day on a rotating schedule, during which they have access to their swimming pool. (“Tigers like the water, lions don’t,” says Rosaire.) Feeding time is in the evening, and one-hour training sessions take place during the morning, when it’s cooler.

At a recent weekend demonstration, a small crowd gathers beforehand, with cameras at the ready, to watch several bears at play. As if aware they have an audience, the bears splash in their outdoor bathtub, growl at each other, and amble over rocks and logs.

Another group of visitors assembles to check out the lions and tigers. A huge slab of meat awaits one of the lions. Other cats doze contentedly, stretch

their legs, or take drinks of water with their big pink tongues.

As 1:30 p.m. approaches, everyone heads inside to take a seat around a circular steel cage. Soon Rosaire appears. Blond and wearing a leopard-print shirt, she’s serving as the mistress of ceremonies for today’s demonstration.

Assorted members of her family first take their turns in the center of the ring. A cousin speaks about her work with



During a recent demonstration at the habitat, female tiger Noel leaps over Conan.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BIG CAT HABITAT

An eighth-generation member of a famed English family of animal trainers, Rosaire spent most of her life around animals. But it was caring for Clarence the Cross-Eyed Lion that got her “hooked on cats.”

exotic birds. Rosaire’s sister Pam shows a ring-tailed lemur to the crowd, letting kids in the audience feed it raisins. Pam later returns with her chimp, Ricky, who waves, blows kisses, and goofs around like the six-year-old he is. Rosaire’s stepmother shows the miniature horse Rosaire’s father had been working with before he passed away. The “Mad Mutt Revue” features a poodle, Jack Russell terrier, and other pooches jumping through hoops and over hurdles.

Finally, it’s time for the main event, and Rosaire steps into the ring. Her son, Clayton, whom Rosaire is grooming to one day take over the habitat, often does the big cat demonstration, but today Rosaire is in charge. She first introduces Tony, a Bengal tiger who is new to the habitat. He jumps onto a metal platform to await the arrival of the other tigers who’ll be joining him today.

Next comes Raja, a slightly chubby Siberian tiger who, Rosaire jokes, “is always on a diet.” He’s followed by Bambula and GG, two female tigers who aren’t quite sure about Tony, the new addition to their group. According to Rosaire, it takes a while for the cats to adjust to newcomers, a fact evidenced by the growls the girls direct at Tony several times during the demonstration. But eventually they should come around. “Wild tigers are naturally solitary,” says Rosaire. “Captive borns enjoy each other’s company.”

The demonstration focuses more on highlighting the power and beauty of the creatures than on making them do



In addition to the tigers, special guests sometimes appear at the weekend demonstrations, such as Derrick Rosaire, Jr. and his bears and Ricky the chimp.



Sisters Reba and Dane came to the Big Cat Habitat on December 24, 1998.

“tricks.” Rosaire does show how they can jump over things and lie down in a row, all the while tossing the cats chunks of raw meat she keeps in a container clipped to her belt. “These are all things they’re naturally able to do,” says Rosaire. “We just teach them in a sequence.”

Educating others about exotic animals is important to Rosaire, which is one reason she began doing the public demonstrations several years ago. “Captive exotic animals are ambassadors for their wild counterparts,” she says. “If people don’t see an animal and relate to it, they don’t think about saving it in the wild. But once they come face-to-face with one, they say, ‘We can’t let these disappear.’”

Though she has a successor lined up, Rosaire shows no signs of slowing down when it comes to her rescue efforts. In fact, plans are underway to expand the sanctuary by adding a chimp facility and eventually an elephant compound.

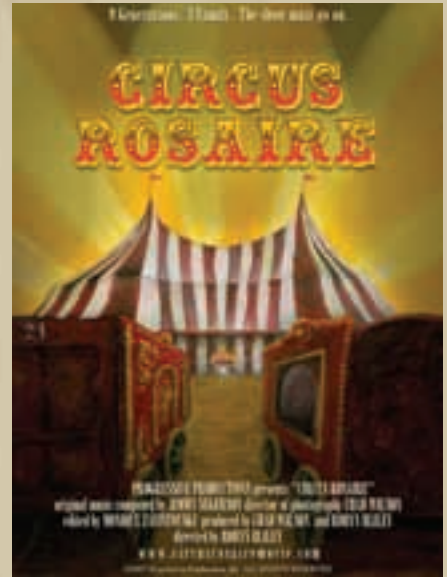
And while eastern Sarasota County, where the habitat is located, is also growing and expanding, don’t expect Rosaire to sell out to developers. “You can tell this is really impor-

tant to us, because our property is worth a lot of money. We could all retire and do nothing,” she says. “[When the habitat opened] it was way out in the country. There was a dirt road in front of the property. All around us was pastures, and there was no I-75 yet. Now [development is] coming in all around us. But fortunately, all of our neighbors love what we do. They love the sound of the animals roaring at night. They don’t want another development here, they’d rather have ours.

“This isn’t about money; it’s not really a job, it’s a way of life,” continues Rosaire. “We really are 100 percent dedicated to our animals. And we think it’s important that people get to see them and learn to appreciate them and understand what’s going on in the wild, because the wild is rapidly disappearing.”

For more information about the Big Cat Habitat and Gulf Coast Sanctuary, call 941-371-6377 or visit www.bigcathabitat.org.

Beth Luberecki is a Venice, Florida-based freelance writer and features editor of Times of the Islands.



From Big Top to Big Screen

Kay Rosaire’s family has a long history of training animals seen on television and in movies. But recently, the Rosaire family stepped in front of the camera themselves for the documentary *Circus Rosaire*. Directed by Robyn Bliley, the ninety-three-minute film made a big splash at the 2007 Sarasota Film Festival, where it won the Audience Award for Best Documentary Feature.

“We were pleased with it,” Rosaire says of the film. “It’s kind of scary when people follow you around and film all the time. But it’s a great thing for us to have and for future generations to have.”

Here, Bliley shares with us why she made the film and what it was like to work with the storied family and its animal charges.

Times of the Islands: What inspired you to film a documentary about the Rosaire family?

Robyn Bliley: I met Roger Zoppe, Pam Rosaire’s husband, on my sixth birthday when my mom took me to the circus. Shortly after, I met Pam Rosaire. Thus began a lifelong friendship. In 2002, after a decade of working in Hollywood as an actress and producer, I met the rest of the Rosaire family. I was overwhelmed at the unique and loving bond they share with their repertoire of animals. At the same time, I was very sad, because the Rosaire family are in a con-



Circus Rosaire director Robyn Bliley (bottom right) and cinematographer and producer Chad Wilson (top right) recently debuted their film about the Rosaire family (above) at the Sarasota Film Festival.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ROBYN BILEY

stant struggle to continue doing what they do. I knew it was a story that I had to tell. For nine generations, the Rosaire family has been in the circus business, but it is an industry that is slowly dying. Major declines in audience attendance, increasing yet legitimate concerns for animal welfare, and the proliferation of animal-free circuses have nearly driven animal trainers like the Rosaire family out of the business. What's fascinating about the Rosaire family is that they have persevered and adapted. True animal trainers, like the Rosaire family, are themselves endangered species.

TOTI: What was your experience like making *Circus Rosaire*?

RB: My husband, cinematographer and producer Chad Wilson, and I started making the film in the summer of 2002. It was a challenging, stressful, rewarding, terrifying, and inspiring documentary to make. It is a 100 percent independent production, paid for with earned profits from our production company, Progressive Productions. During the course of shooting our film, the Rosaire family saw their share of tragedy and we captured it. The strength, courage, love, and perseverance that ran through the Rosaire family during

these times of loss were truly inspiring and heartwarming.

TOTI: What do you hope audiences take away from a viewing of *Circus Rosaire*?

RB: *Circus Rosaire* is a story that reaffirms the beauty of perseverance, the value of tradition, and the goodness of humanity. But, most of all, it is a story about love. And everyone, no matter their view on animals and animal trainers, can relate to and feel the emotional pathos in the film.

TOTI: Can you tell me about your experience with the film at the Sarasota Film Festival?

RB: Being a part of the Sarasota Film Festival was an incredible experience. The Rosaire family had never seen anything of the film, so we were eagerly anticipating their reaction. There was a lot of laughing, crying, and cheering in the audience. The family was very moved by the film, and they all really love the final piece. It was our first public screening of the film and it was incredibly well received. We had three sold-out screenings and they added a fourth.

TOTI: What's next for the film?

RB: We hope to secure distribution for the film and get it out there for the masses.

—Beth Luberecki



Kay Rosaire spends some time with Leeds the lion.