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WITH THE KIDS

Up close and exotic

A family's love of animals launched the Eco Station teaching zoo and rescue center.

By Brenda Rees
Special to The Times

Sheba lived in a home where no one played with her. Ibis was hidden at a cat kennel where she was fed hot dogs and bologna. Willy got too big. And Jay was trained to hide in a suitcase if authorities came a-calling.

Despite the many unhappy endings for countless smuggled animals, some lucky critters — such as Sheba, Ibis, Willy and Jay — are given a second chance at the STAR Eco Station, a rescue, rehabilitation and education center in Culver City.

In addition to providing care for unwanted exotic animals either donated by the public or confiscated by governmental agencies, the station welcomes schoolchildren and families to come pet an alligator or stroke a snake as they learn about endangered species, environmental concerns and how kids can make a difference.

Indeed, the station's annual Dinofaire on Sunday is simply another opportunity for staffers to enlighten children and adults about creatures of the world — by celebrating the beasts that came before, says Katya Bozzi, co-founder of the Eco Station.

"The fair is very fun. We've got Dinoman putting on a great educational show with these blow-up life-sized dinosaurs," Bozzi says. "But [the event] is a way for us to talk about extinction and what causes animals to die out. That's how we make it pertinent to today."

Stressing conservation here and abroad, the Eco Station was the brainchild of Bozzi's husband Erick, daughter Katiana and son Erick Jr., who wanted to expand their successful Science, Theatre Arts and Recreation (STAR) program that offers educational enrichment courses. The Eco Station grew out of the family's love of animals and was fueled by the community, Bozzi says.

"When parents realized what we wanted to do, we had so much help and supplies donated to us," Bozzi says about the facility, which opened in 1997 on Sepulveda Boulevard. During the planning and construction of that center, Bozzi's husband was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease. His last public appearance was at the station's dedication ceremony, and he died shortly thereafter.

The center was a hit, with thousands coming for tours, and the Bozzis realized they needed more space. Relying again on donated financial help and manpower, organizers transformed an 18,000-square-foot location into a jungle with Mayan-esque blocks, vines, fountains and Amazonian touches. The present Eco Station opened in 2000.

Now, during the week, students from 42 school districts hear presentations and get hands-on animal experiences; on weekends, the station hosts tours in which the public can meet and greet exotic birds, fish and mammals as well as touch some reptiles, such as a Burmese python, a fat-tailed gecko and a skink. There are surprises — and animals with heartbreaking stories to tell — around every door at the Eco Station.

A beautiful Senegal parrot, Sheba never got the attention exotic birds need and arrived at the station emotionally shut down; she has since bonded with her handlers. Ibis, a malnourished African serval whose previous owner masqueraded her as a large domesticated cat, is now healthy and enjoys playing with her tail.

Willy the red-bellied pacu (related to the piranha) was found on the doorstep in a bucket; the fish, once 2 inches long, was growing into his normal size — a whopping 30 inches. And kept as a housecat in Burbank for years, Jay the bobcat is now recovering from surgeries that repaired his debilitating declawing operation and one operation that vets hope will help correct his hip dysplasia.

"Jay loves to play with us," says Christina Lopez, 21, an animal educator. "He must have been around dogs early in his life, because sometimes he acts like one. But Jay's a big cat who likes to run, stalk a rope or attack an object when he

isn't sleeping."

Lopez says that folks who purchase exotic animals often don't realize their new pets require specialized maintenance and food, not to mention extra space when fully grown. "Soon, the thrill wears off and interest is lost. The animal becomes abandoned and neglected," she says. "We see it all the time."

Animals at the station are just a droplet in the ocean of illegally imported animals that arrive in the United States every year. Smuggled in boxes and PVC pipes, concealed in burlap bags and in car tires, these confused, hurt and oftentimes diseased creatures fuel a multibillion-dollar wildlife black market, according to the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Lopez remembers getting the call to help out when the station received a seized shipment of 400 agamas, a type of African lizard. "Only 150 were alive and we tried to clean them up and get them comfortable," she says. "But then we noticed legs and arms were missing." In the end, the lizards all died from an undiagnosed disease that basically ate them alive.

"Those are very hard times for us," Lopez says. "I sometimes don't understand what makes people do these sorts of things."

Still, the mission of the Eco Station gives Lopez hope. "I want everyone who comes here to get motivated," she says.

"They can learn how to make things better for animals here and those in other parts of the world," she says. "We can all take things a step farther."