

Carole Baskin, CEO of Big Cat Rescue, with Flavio, a 22-year-old male Siberian/Bengal tiger who retired from the circus



TIGER LADY

PHOTO FROM BIGCATRESCUE.ORG

CAROLE BASKIN'S BIG CAT RESCUE HAS SAVED THE LIVES OF MORE THAN 100 BIG CATS THROUGHOUT THE UNITED STATES

By Amy Ellis

Carole Baskin may be the most public face of Big Cat Rescue in Tampa, but she is quick to point out that the 100-plus volunteers who help run the 45-acre sanctuary in northwest Hillsborough County are the lifeblood of the organization.

"I can't take credit," says Baskin, who founded the nonprofit sanctuary in 1992 and oversees it with her husband, Howard, a Harvard-educated management consultant who handles the operation's finances. "It is a collective effort of my entire family and [our] volunteers and staff."

Baskin, a former real estate investor whose work with wild cats has been featured on Animal Planet, the Discovery Channel and CNN, says she never set out to start a wildlife sanctuary.

She and her late husband, Don Lewis, bought their first wild cat, a bobcat, as a pet in 1992. That led to the purchase of more than 50 bobcats from a Minnesota "fur farm" and the start of a 15-year mission to rescue abused, neglected or unwanted wild cats.

Today, Big Cat Rescue houses more than 140 lions, tigers, leopards, cougars and bobcats, many of whom have been rescued from poor conditions at roadside zoos, backyard collections and exotic animal auctions throughout the United States. Each year the sanctuary must turn away hundreds of exotic cats to avoid crowding its inhabitants.

"Our biggest goal is to create a world where we don't need animal sanctuaries," says Baskin, who has traveled to Tallahassee and Washington to

advocate for stricter animal protection laws.

"That means ending the abuse and neglect of exotic animals living their lives in filthy conditions in captivity."

One female lion, Nikita, arrived at Big Cat Rescue after being seized during a drug raid in Nashville. She had been chained to a wall for the first year of her life, Baskin says. Buffy, a 20-year-old Bengal tiger, is retired from the circus, as are several other big cats at the site. Many more were simply discarded by private owners who could no longer handle them because of their size, expensive care or temperament.

"People think they are so cuddly and cute when they are cubs, but one day, they have a full-grown tiger living in their back yard and they don't know what to do with it," she says. "They simply don't have all the facts or realize that these are wild animals who will live 20 years or more and need extensive care and attention."

The sanctuary is part educational enterprise, part wildlife "attraction," offering guided tours, wildlife encounters, nighttime excursions and kids' camps. The site is available for weddings and private parties. Baskin, a notary public, will even provide wedding vows and perform the ceremony in coattails or a hula skirt, depending on the theme.

While she may be known for her leopard-print wardrobe and the safari-themed Fur Ball fundraiser that attracts celebrity activists including Bo Derek, Baskin is serious about her mission.

"My hope is that someday something will shift in

the collective consciousness of society regarding the breeding and selling of these beautiful animals as pets," she says. "For years that has been socially acceptable, but I believe that is starting to shift."

Despite her past as an exotic pet owner and breeder, Baskin says her opinion about private ownership of wild cats has evolved over the years. She no longer believes it is right to keep exotic animals as pets and campaigns for state and federal laws to end the practice.

The work has not come without controversy. The Baskins have been targeted by other exotic animal owners who say her rescue operation is nothing more than a home for her large, private collection. The fact that Baskin once bred and sold exotic animals and now campaigns against such practices marks her as a hypocrite, critics say.

In Baskin's mind, her past gives her mission even more credibility.

"I know the dirty little secrets of this industry and I can expose the issue for what it really is," she says. "I was one of those people who thought it was a good idea to own a wild cat as a pet and after years of experience, I woke up and realized how misguided that is."

Howard Baskin sees his role as keeping the operation in the black so his wife can do what she does best — fight for the big cats she adores.

"Financial stability has freed Carole to devote far more of her time to solving the problem [and] changing the laws," he says. "I cannot tell you how proud of her I am. She is a force." ■