

Primate Protector

Patti Ragan traded her business suits for a chance to care for ailing animals.

By Aline Mendelsohn | Sentinel Staff Writer
Orlando Sentinel Posted February 17, 2004

WAUCHULA -- The teenager gazes at Patti Ragan with soulful black eyes. His name is Grub. Just Grub, no last name. Kind of like Madonna, with more hair.

Ragan hands Grub a foam emery board, and he files his glovelike nails absently. For a moment, you think he might be human. Then, he reminds you that he's a chimpanzee. Abruptly ending his manicure, Grub examines the emery board, peels it, chews on it, breaks it and sniffs it.

Grub is like that sometimes, and Ragan, of all people, would know. She has cared for him for years.

Some call Ragan the Jane Goodall of Florida. For more than 20 years, she has been a passionate advocate for chimpanzees and orangutans -- so passionate that she changed her life to open a sanctuary and live among her "sweethearts." Just don't ask her to pick a favorite. She loves them all.

A moving sight

She always loved animals, but Ragan's career path took her elsewhere. She majored in education at Florida State University, worked as an elementary-school teacher for six years and then ran an office-staffing business in Miami. For years, she also volunteered as a docent for the Miami Metrozoo and served on its board of directors.

In 1984, Ragan took a three-week trip to Borneo, near Indonesia, as a volunteer for the environmental organization Earthwatch. She assisted a primatologist, observing and tracking wild orangutans. As Ragan watched the graceful animals glide slowly through the trees, gathering fruit, something stirred within her.

"It was the most moving thing I've ever seen," Ragan says. "You just realize with great humility that man is not the only thing on this earth."

The following year, Ragan returned to Borneo for a few months on her own, and, in the next few years, she volunteered for other Earthwatch projects.

In the early '90s, an animal breeder who knew of Ragan's background asked her to care for Pongo, an orangutan neglected by his mother. The timing couldn't have been better. Ragan had sold her business six months earlier, looking for a different pace, and she was exploring her options. Traveling the world sounded appealing.

But so did this project.

So she traded her business suits and heels for jeans and tennis shoes; weekly manicures for hands-on work; her sports car for a dusty truck.

Ragan's experience with animals qualified her for the license required by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Licensed individuals may care for apes, but only if they have a proper facility, such as a zoo. Pongo was staying at an animal attraction in Miami, where Ragan soon was also caring for other apes that were brought to her. Most of the apes were has-been entertainers who had worked in circuses or Hollywood. Cute and cuddly young apes can grow up to be strong and unwieldy adults, too much to handle. As a result, they are often stuck in cages.

Ragan ached for the neglected animals.

Ron Magill knew Ragan through her volunteer work at the MetroZoo. He remembers her caring for an ill orangutan for 36 hours straight, until the animal died.

"I remember looking at Patti and seeing a pain on her face that was indescribable," says Magill, communications director for the MetroZoo. "That told me that this is much more than a hobby or an avocation. This is her life."

As more needy chimps and orangutans came her way, she realized that they needed their own sanctuary.

In 1993, Ragan founded the Center for Great Apes, devoting all her time and energy to the nonprofit organization. She wanted the animals to have more space and freedom to move about, so four years later, she moved the apes -- and herself -- from Miami to their new home, deep in the country.

Safety and dignity

The Center for Great Apes is not a place you just happen upon. Past miles of orange groves on country roads, the Hardee County sanctuary spreads out over 50 acres of lush Florida woods near the Peace River.

Nestled inside the woods, 14 chimpanzees and orangutans roam through gated walkways and spacious, domed enclosures. Apes are much stronger than humans are, Ragan says. In Florida, they are classified as potentially dangerous animals, so they must live in captivity.

"We try to provide as much dignity as possible, with safety," Ragan says.

Five staff members work at the center, and through the years, dozens of people have volunteered for everything from maintaining the grounds to running the Web site, prime-apes.org.

Caretakers tend to the apes' daily needs, but Ragan makes time every day to visit them. Sometimes she stays up until 2 a.m. working on all the paperwork that comes with her job.

"I've never seen somebody so dedicated to a cause," says Eddie Lorenzo, a Miami graphic artist who has volunteered extensively for the center.

Different needs

One of them even goes home with Ragan on occasion. Knuckles, the youngest of the apes, sometimes sleeps in a portable cage in Ragan's home at the center.

Knuckles epitomizes the popular notion of chimps. He weighs 40 pounds, measures 2 feet tall. He came to the sanctuary from a California entertainment trainer.

Because of his cerebral palsy, Knuckles could not perform. When he arrived at the center, he couldn't climb or feed himself either. With the help of the caretakers and physical and occupational therapists, he has come a long way.

The 4-year-old plops down on caretaker Joy Crofton's lap. Crofton strokes his back and tickles his tummy as Knuckles "chimp laughs" in delight.

Like Knuckles, each ape has a distinct personality.

Grub, whom Ragan named after famed primatologist Jane Goodall's son, is the "stud-muffin" of the chimps, the alpha male. Butch, a former circus chimp, came from a biomedical lab in New Mexico. His legs had atrophied from being stuck in a cage. Mari, an orangutan, has no arms because her mother bit them off. Still, she manages to move about elegantly.

Ragan is drawn to the animals in part because they resemble humans, though she respects them for the intelligent animals they are. When she and the caretakers work with them, "We recognize a lot of things in ourselves," Ragan says, and she doesn't mean just opposable thumbs.

Studies have shown that apes can experience and express a wide range of emotions: jealousy, empathy, fear, joy. They get their feelings hurt and sometimes need to be alone.

Once, Ragan stumbled and skinned her knee. Grub began to cry and scream in concern for Ragan, whom he has known for more than 10 years.

Ragan had to comfort him, to make sure he knew she was OK.

A legacy

Ragan has had to turn away needy chimps and orangutans, because the center doesn't have the resources to care for more at this time.

"There are so many of these animals," says Andrea Obregon, special-events manager and marketing coordinator at the Zoological Society of Florida. "Once they become a certain age they have nowhere to go."

Ragan has tried to give them a place to go that will be there even when she's gone.

"Right now, I'm guiding the ship, but whether I retire or die, this project will carry on," she says. "This will go on beyond my life."

Aline Mendelsohn can be reached at amendelsohn@orlandosentinel.com or 407-420-5352.

the wild, cruel beast is not behind the bars of the cage. he is in front of it - axel munthe

"Never doubt that a small group of dedicated citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." Margaret Mead