

Retired apes to appear on national television

by **Kevin J. Shutt** for the **News Sun**, Sebring, FL
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WAUCHULA — The *Today Show*'s Kerry Saunders was in the area this week working on a story that is scheduled to run on NBC this morning.

The Center for Great Apes founder and director Patti Ragan said Saunders interviewed her on Tuesday and returned this morning for a live spot for the *Today* show. The show is aired on NBC, Channel 8, from 7-9:30 a.m. Ragan said the center will be featured sometime after 7:30 a.m.

"His angle was supposed to be what happens to entertainment animals after they retire," Ragan said. "His slant was they retired to Florida like people do and they have a great life."

But during their time together, Ragan said she tried to convey that not all great apes share the same destiny.

"They don't all have a sanctuaried life after entertainment," she said, explaining that performance orangutans and chimpanzees have a "shelf life" of six to eight years. "They live 50 to 60 years. I explained to him that accredited zoos won't take them. Many end up in roadside zoos. ... The trainers and ad agencies don't pay for their retirement."

Of the 10 sanctuaries in North America that try to provide a better life for chimpanzees, Ragan's center is the only facility that also takes orangutans, she said.

Many of the residents at the Center are former actors, having appeared in Super Bowl commercials, movies and even one who played a nurse on a soap opera.

Yes. One of the apes played a nurse on television who fell in love with a human doctor, according to Lexi Lepiarz, an intern who's heading for the Kansas City Zoo at the conclusion of her internship this weekend.

After graduating from college, Lepiarz went to work for an entertainment company.

"I saw firsthand how they treated these animals, to train them, and that's one of the reasons I left the industry," she said, explaining how she ended up at the Center for Great Apes.

She said the quality of life for show animals, apes in particular, is debatable.

Some of the inherent pitfalls for those in entertainment is that they typically live sheltered from other apes, are taken from their mothers at birth, live in 8-foot by 8-foot cages, and rarely see the outdoors, Lepiarz said.

"Because they're pulled away from their mothers at birth, we often get them with aberrant behaviors," Lepiarz said.

Because the Center is a sanctuary and not a zoo, outsiders are rare, Ragan said.

Occasionally, a school will come for a field trip or financial sponsors (such as during a recent members' outing) will be allowed to wander the grounds with volunteers on hand to answer questions.

Ragan said the entertainment industry and the great ape trainers don't fund the animals' retirement, leaving funding up to donors and private foundation grants.

For more information or to make a donation, log on to www.centerforgreatapes.org, send correspondence to P.O. Box 488, Wauchula, FL, 33873, or call (863) 767-8903.

Ragan said the April 1 fund-raiser at R.J. Gator's in Sebring netted more than \$7,000, for which she said she was grateful to the Highlands County community.

Ragan also has been working with PBS this week on a documentary and "Florida Living" magazine has been out to do a story.

For each of the 43 apes — 14 orangutans and 29 chimpanzees — she said it costs \$14,000 annually for direct care.