

Profiles in Leadership -

Heidi Berry- Director of CARE - Center for Animal Research and Education

by J.D. Clark

Upon arrival, you see two lions, lounging in the shade. A little farther in, a large white tiger stalks back and forth.

At first, it may seem like an exotic, wild locale, but in fact, it is the Center for Animal Research and Education (CARE), located outside Bridgeport near FM 2123.

Heidi Berry, the director of CARE, calls the center “a passion,” not just for herself, but also for the interns and volunteers that are responsible for making the unique location a success.

Berry, an Ohio native, became involved with big cats while she was attending graduate school for child therapy at Kent State. She made an acquaintance with a person that managed a big cat facility and began working there.

“I loved working with kids,” Berry explained, “but I refocused with animals. They really are not so different.”

That initial experience led Berry to work in similar facilities across the country, until she ultimately established her own center near Bridgeport.

Berry said the facility dates to 1990, but CARE was actually created as a non-profit organization in 2003. Currently, 54 big cats reside at the center, including lions, tigers, and leopards.

“And that doesn’t include the deer and parakeets,” Berry laughed.

Many of the cats, according to Berry, arrived because they belonged to “people who could not take care of them.”

Berry said people often decide that the big cats would make good pets, but then realize how difficult they are to care for. Furthermore, in a backyard or a home, the situation is dangerous not only for the cat but also for other people.

Berry said the living conditions for these cats are often “deplorable,” so CARE strives to provide “a home of love” for the large animals.

Because it is a non-profit organization, CARE relies on donations from private donations and corporations. Berry said the center is fortunate to have “a lot of local donors” that help maintain and improve the facilities.

But what happens when a big cat needs medical attention? According to Berry, a local connection comes into play there, as well. Dr. Bill McGee and Dr. Jeff Williams, both of the Bridgeport Animal Hospital, are the veterinarians that treat the big cats residing at CARE.

“They are exceptional,” Berry said. “We’re really blessed to have them.”

Caring for the cats is not a task that Berry tackles alone; in fact, she currently has three interns working at the facility.

The interns, all unpaid, typically work for four months, and live in an on-site house. Berry said she receives at least 400 intern applications every year from all over the United States; the current interns hail from Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Montana.



Rather than searching for interns, Berry is often contacted by potential interns, who learned about CARE through its site (www.bigcatcare.org) or through the American Association of Zoo Keepers.

Berry said some interns receive college credits, others are seeking an edge for graduate school, and some are simply gaining experience in the field before beginning a permanent job.

Berry said she is hard-pressed to explain how she selects her interns. “Their applications have something that grabs me,” she explained. “Something tells me they are willing to do what they have to do.”

Being an intern is not an easy job, according to Berry, nor is it a glamorous one. “A lot of the time, it’s dirty, messy, and stinky,” she laughed. In addition to feeding and cleaning, interns also help conduct research. Currently, for example, the center is participating in a nationwide study of the dental health of big cats.

When asked how she leads her interns to maintain a successful center, Berry said, “I think working *with* people is the real answer.”

“If you don’t work with people,” she explained, “you don’t gain their respect. And you can’t respect their position until you have worked in it.”

“Respect is huge in my world,” she said. “That goes both ways.”

Another part of being an effective leader, Berry said, is to have “a common goal” and “a shared passion.”

It is that shared passion, Berry believes, that ensures the continued success of CARE. In addition to her work and the contributions of the interns, Berry said that her “strong base of volunteers,” some driving from as far as Rockwall, help the center stay strong.

“They are just phenomenal,” said Berry.

Despite currently being full, Berry said CARE still receives weekly phone calls with people trying to find much-needed homes for more big cats.

When asked what she would like to see for the center in the future, Berry answered, “No more phone calls.”