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GIVE ME YOUR ABUSED & ABANDONED: Noah's Ark serves as a refuge for both animals and children

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By VERA LAWLOR

At four, most little girls are playing with dolls or reading books. Not Jama Hedgecoth, she was already busy with what she understood as her life's mission: taking care of injured or abused animals. When Hedgecoth was eight she visited an orphanage in Mexico with her father, a traveling minister, and was so moved at the poverty in which the children lived, she told her parents when she grew up she would open a sanctuary for homeless and abused animals and children.

Today at 41, she is the founding director of Noah's Ark Animal Rehabilitation Center and Children's Care Home located on a 250-acre farm in Georgia. The sanctuary cares for up to 800 injured, abandoned, or confiscated wildlife and exotics as well as 24 abandoned or abused children. The animals and children living at the Ark work miracles for one another everyday, said Hedgecoth, who sees her sanctuary as a ministry.

"Abused animals and children can relate with one another in a way that myself and other people who have not been abused cannot," said Hedgecoth, the mother of four biological children and two adopted children.

The younger children at the Ark are given the responsibility of bottle feeding orphaned baby animals while the older children help take care of the larger exotics such as tigers, bears, monkeys and snakes.

As they work with the animals the children feel the unconditional love and a bond begins to develop. Before long they are pouring their hearts out to the animals. That's the beginning of the healing process, Hedgecoth said, and soon the children start to open up to therapists.

One little girl who came to the sanctuary had been so badly abused she wouldn't speak to anyone. In fact, the situation was so dire that Hedgecoth thought they might not be able to help her. Then one day Hedgecoth watched in amazement as an orphan fawn walked up to the hurting child who sat under a tree. The deer climbed into the little girl's lap. At first the youngster pushed the animal away but the fawn kept coming back and nuzzling against her and eventually they became the best of friends. This new relationship gave the little girl the courage to open up to the staff and other children at the sanctuary.

"It's remarkable to see the special connection between abused children and these animals," Hedgecoth said.

Sometimes the experience of caring for the animals helps older children come to terms with deeply hidden emotions.

"A 13-year old girl who was helping me bottle feed baby squirrels, asked why her mother had abandoned her when she was only three-months-old?" Hedgecoth said.

The experience of nurturing and bonding with the squirrels — and seeing how helpless they were — had helped the teenager connect with her own anger and hurt at having been abandoned by her mother when she was just a baby.

"I tell these kids they never have to forget the abandonment or the abuse but if they can't find a way in their hearts to forgive, it will come back to haunt them when they are adults," Hedgecoth said.



Animals, she added, make wonderful role models for the children when it comes to forgiveness.

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"Some of the animals come to us with their ears chopped off and we've had some who were dipped in boiling oil; yet they give us their unconditional love and trust when they come here," she said.

Hedgecoth's son, Charlie Jr., and his wife Angie, are the primary caregivers for the children at Noah's Ark. The couple offer stability in a family setting. The youngsters are not only involved in the day-to-day care of the animals but also take part in other activities, on and off the property, that help them build social skills and learn appropriate boundaries and behaviors. The ultimate goal is to find them new loving homes so the Sanctuary can continue to take in other children in need.

Eight percent of the wildlife accepted at the Ark are rehabilitated and returned to the wild. Those that can't be released for health reasons live out their lives at the sanctuary as do the exotics. Species who would not normally share space in the wild become fast friends at Noah's Ark. For example, three cubs - a bear, a lion and a tiger - were brought to the sanctuary together a number of years ago. Today they weigh between 400 and 500 pounds, share the same habitat, and are handled by Hedgecoth and her husband Charlie. The three are big favorites with the children and visitors. Animals are brought to Noah's Ark by local animal shelters, rescue groups, and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. Plans are underway to build a shelter for homeless domestic animals that will be run by resident teenagers.

In speaking by phone about her childhood dream, Hedgecoth said, the biggest reason for her success was her strong belief in God. After that she said the key was: "To surround myself with people who were encouragers and stay away from people who tried to discourage me. That, and the fact that I was willing to sacrifice everything and anything."

It helped that she married a man who was accepting of his wife's passion.

"In the beginning he thought I had kind of a funny problem and would say 'why did you have to bring home 14 more dogs?'" Hedge-coth recalls. "I would say I had to rescue them, did you want them to die?"

At first the couple did whatever it took to feed the animals in their care, even if that meant going without electricity, digging in dumpsters for discarded food, or asking restaurants and delis for food scraps. This lifestyle continued even when the couple had children.

"My family never saw caring for our animals as a hardship — it was an adventure for us," Hedgecoth said. "The electricity would go off for about three weeks, the local paper would run a story about how we were rescuing animals, people would send us money, and we would get our power back."

The couple's first foster child was a 13-year-old boy they found sleeping beside a dumpster when they were foraging for food for their animals. His parents had died when he was 10 and the boy had been living alone moving from place to place. With each challenge the family developed a closer bond, Hedgecoth said.

"Today all of our children — who have learned that giving back is very rewarding — are all doing service work at Noah's Ark or at church," she added.

When it comes to the running of the sanctuary, Hedgecoth said, God is at the helm. One of his biggest miracles, she believes, was in 1990 when they purchased their current property for \$483,000 so they could take in more animals and children. Three months into the deal the couple were broke and received an eviction notice. They were given just a few weeks to pack up all the animals and children and leave the property. Out of the blue, total strangers, who had read about the Ark, and heard about the eviction notice from their lawyer, purchased the property and donated it to the sanctuary.

"I love sharing these stories of faith because they give people hope and allow them to pursue their own dreams," Hedgecoth said.

Noah's Ark welcomes visitors and is open for public tours six days a week. The sanctuary is grateful for financial donations as well as donations of supplies and expertise.

For a wish list along with more information about the facility visit www.noahs-ark.org.

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