

Noah's Ark

A Little Girl's Dream

By SCOTT ANDERSON



Noah's Ark was founded by Jama Hedgecoth, the daughter of an itinerant preacher who spent much of her childhood on the road. As a child, Hedgecoth cared for injured and unwanted animals, nursing them back to health and then finding homes for them. It ultimately caused problems for the family when she picked up stray animals during trips and tried to transport them from town to town. The constant objections of her parents and numerous utterances of the words—"Be patient" and "Wait"—solidified Hedgecoth's resolve to have a place where she could take care of as many unwanted or neglected animals as she liked.

Through the years, her work with

animals also grew into a vision of caring for abused and neglected children. Her travels gave her ample opportunity to see countless orphans and children in dire need of someone to care for them.

"With every stray animal or lonely kid we had to leave behind, I told my parents all about my dreams again," Hedgecoth said. "By the time I was a teenager, I was tired of the word 'wait.'"

Hedgecoth and her husband, Charlie, opened the original Noah's Ark in 1978 in Ellenwood. The idea for the name stemmed from the fact that an ark is a vessel of safety in the midst of danger, and Hedgecoth's facility was built to shield children and animals from today's floods of abuse and neglect.

When the small farm they were renting became overburdened with hundreds of unwanted and disabled animals Jama had rescued, Hedgecoth decided a bigger place was needed. By then, she and Charlie had five children, and their financial situation was unstable. Yet Hedgecoth was determined to realize her dream and put her faith in the decision that she was making. That decision led her family to Locust Grove.

Building on Faith

The current facility, which opened in 1990, became a reality because of considerable prayers and a generous benefactor who prefers to remain anony-

When Noah loaded the animals into his ark to escape the great flood, he probably didn't board a Holstein cow the size of an ox, a three-legged deer, a goat accused of murder, a Beefalo or a Binturong. But a modern Noah's Ark has each of those, and you won't have to suffer through 40 days and 40 nights of a rain to get a glimpse of this set of animals rescued from certain death.

Noah's Ark Rehabilitation Center and Noah's Ark Children Care Homes sit behind a large iron gate and a 10-foot fence on L.G. Griffin Road in Locust Grove. While many Henry County residents are familiar with the organizations and their efforts, visitors and new residents often assume Noah's Ark is not open to the public.

"The size of our facility and the nature of what we do makes the gate and fencing a necessity," said Angie Martin, office manager for Noah's Ark. "But people see it and assume that they can't get in."

Guests are welcome Mondays through Saturdays and can take advantage of a large visitors' center and picnic area, as well as 40 acres of nature trails and natural habitats. Guided tours also are available by appointment. While there is no admission charge, Martin says that contributions are needed and appreciated. The Children Care Homes receive a per diem from state funds, but rely heavily on donations and individual "child sponsorship." The rehabilitation center, however, is funded entirely by donations from corporations and the general public.



Above: Noah's Ark Rehabilitation Center and Children Care Homes, provides shelter and caring for 1,000 animals and a dozen children in need of foster care.

Right: Founder Jama Hedgecoth pictured, at right, with one her favorite animals.

"The employees tease me a lot when I start talking about my favorite animals because they say I have 100 favorites. They're right. The animal that needs me the most at that moment is always my favorite." - Jama Hedgecoth



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mous. The site consisted of 250 acres that eventually would hold the animal rehabilitation center, a long-term residential care children's home, a training and administration building, natural habitats for the animals and nature trails.

The Children Care Homes house children who have been abused and abandoned and are in need of long-term foster care. They receive shelter, clothing, medical care, education and, most important, love.

"Many of our children don't work out in foster homes," Hedgecoth said. "These children don't have anywhere else to go, so we take them in."

The Children Care Homes currently house 12 children, and Noah's Ark recently broke ground to expand the facility to accommodate 24, hopefully some time this year. Hedgecoth eventually hopes to expand the home to serve many more.

"We want to build a separate home by the lake on our property that would accommodate 400 children," Hedgecoth said. "It would be broken into family units of 12, like our current home."

In addition to the expansion of the Children Care Homes, Noah's Ark also is building an animal adoption center. When completed, Hedgecoth hopes to be able to continue what she started as a child: finding homes for unwanted pets. Amazingly, the construction is proceeding without a contractor and on very little money.

"We're doing it all in-house," Hedgecoth said. "We don't really have all of the financing in place and have very few experienced builders working on it, but we've started it on faith. We really are hoping for volunteers to help with both the financing and construction."

Caring for Animals in Need

The rehabilitation center currently has almost 1,000 animals in residence and serves a dual purpose: housing both exotic animals and wildlife.

The exotic habitat contains numerous animals, including lions, bears, cougars, tigers and approximately 60 monkeys. Most of the exotic animals come to Noah's Ark from the Georgia

Department of Natural Resources. Many have been neglected or abused, but in some cases the owner simply has been cited for owning an exotic pet without a permit. Facilities and individuals must be licensed by the state of Georgia to hold, display or rehabilitate exotic animals and wildlife.

"In those cases, since the ani-

mal hasn't been abused, DNR usually gives the owner 30 days to find a suitable home. The owners usually do not have many options, so they call us," Martin said.

"Noah's Ark is perhaps the most cooperative of any facility that we work with in taking in these animals," said Scott Frazier, a wildlife biologist in the



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Special Permit Unit of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. "They're always kind enough to give these animals a home."

Several exotic residents have "retired" from show business to Noah's Ark. Two of the tigers in residence came from a zoo, and a Himalayan bear arrived as a neglect case from a circus.

"Some of our animals were born in captivity with defects," Martin said. "This isn't acceptable to a lot of zoos and circuses, so they end up here. Most of our big cats came to us this way when they were babies."

Occasionally, exotic animals are held on a temporary basis for the Georgia Department of Natural

Resources. This usually occurs when a case is in court and ownership or the right to ownership is in question. Many of these animals end up at Noah's Ark permanently, as do the majority of the exotic animals.

In contrast, Noah's Ark's goal is to treat and release most of the wildlife that comes to the center's attention.

"Any time we have an animal whose natural habitat can be found in the state of Georgia, we want to get that animal back into the wild," Martin said. "Sometimes they have injuries or deformities so serious they can't be released. In those cases, we'll house them here permanently."

Frazier lauds Noah's Ark for providing "wildlife rehabilitation at no cost. There are very few state-run facilities. Most of them are privately owned, so we rely heavily on their cooperation to give these wild animals a home. Noah's Ark is one of the top around for animal care."

In addition to providing homes and rehabilitation for the animals, Noah's Ark also provides education programs to thousands of visitors each year, including the handicapped, elderly and school groups.

"We get visits from area schools and have staff members who take them on tours and educate them about what we do and why it's important," Hedgecoth said.

A Two-Way Street

The wildlife from the rehabilitation center and the children from the Children Care Homes play a vital role for each other. The children participate in "pet therapy," nurturing the baby wildlife as the animals are rehabilitated in hopes of eventually being returned to their natural habitat. This is important because many of the children have been abused or abandoned and may have a hard time relating to people. They're able to learn to care for the animals that, in turn, are receiving much needed affection and attention.

Hedgecoth hopes that the same process will work in the future with the other planned homes at Noah's Ark. In addition to the children's home, she wants to build a home for pregnant teens. She envisions Noah's Ark assist-

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ing in the adoption process and teaching parental and job skills. There are also plans for the home for terminally ill infants and children, a home for teens in trouble, a home for the elderly, a worship center and more natural habitats.

In addition, Noah's Ark's website contains plans, complete with a conceptual rendering, of "virtue village," a small city for children in which good character aids in gaining entrance and earns special privileges. Plans for the village include a general store, library, computer lab, hair salon, music studio, art barn and therapy center. The company is seeking corporate sponsors for naming opportunities on each of the buildings.

"We have 250 acres to work with and, God willing, more land around our property that can be purchased," Hedgecoth said.

Just as the Children Care Homes and the animal rehabilitation center currently fill a need for each other, Hedgecoth's vision is for each of her homes to do the same.

"They really go hand in hand," she said. "For example, we want all of the teens to be able to assist in the home for the elderly and with the animals and so on."

The Stars of the Show

With nearly 1,000 animals, it's hard to imagine that many would stand out, but that certainly isn't the case at Noah's Ark.

"There are so many wonderful facts about these animals," said Kathy Padia,

an employee of the facility.

Several of the residents have had no trouble developing their personalities and cult followers among guests and staff. Among those:

- Big Jack is a 2,800-pound Holstein cow whose withers (shoulders) are more than 6 feet tall.

"The top of his head is actually more than 7 feet tall,"

Martin said.

"He's really just a big baby. You can even ride him. We

got him from a farmer who actually owned two of them and used to let them pull his family around the farm. When

one of them died, he didn't want to keep Big Jack without his mate, so he turned him over to us."

- A goat named Snowball, who passed away earlier this year, was the sub-



Snowball



Big Jack with Jama Hedgecoth

ject of national news coverage more than 10 years ago, when he butted his owner to death. It later was discovered that Snowball had been abused in order to make him mean enough to protect the owner's property and that he actually was being beaten at the time of the attack. There was considerable debate about whether the goat should be humanely destroyed, but Hedgecoth won her battle to have him moved to Noah's

Ark.

"We were surprised at the amount of attention Snowball received from the public," Martin said. "He became so popular at one point that we had postcards printed with his picture. To this day, we still receive a donation from time to time in honor of Snowball."

- John Deere is a favorite among many of the employees at Noah's Ark. When he was 6 months old, the deer was

shot in the right front leg below the knee, and his entire leg had to be amputated. As a result, the center gets numerous phone calls asking about the kangaroo that visitors saw hopping around the facility. Callers have to be informed that it's simply John Deere, Noah's Ark's three-legged deer.

- Noah's Ark is also home to a Beefalo, which is a mixture of a cow and a buffalo, and five Binturong, a relative of the mongoose

that is native to Southeast Asia, Burma and Java.

"I would say that 99 percent of the people I take on tours have no clue what in the world (Binturongs) are," Padia said. "They leave a scent that has been compared to Fritos or stale popcorn."

"The employees tease me a lot when

I start talking about my favorite animals because they say I have 100 favorites," Hedgecoth said. "They're right. The animal that needs me

the most at that moment is always my favorite. When they can take care of themselves and are doing well on their own, we usually try to leave them alone."



John Deere

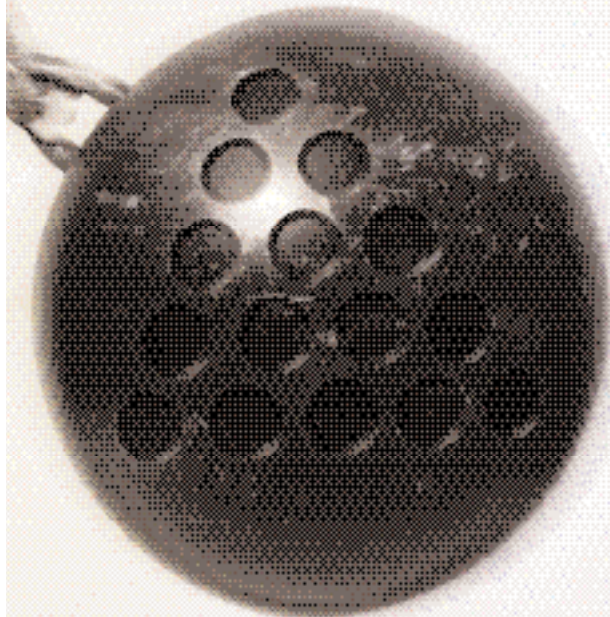


A Beefalo

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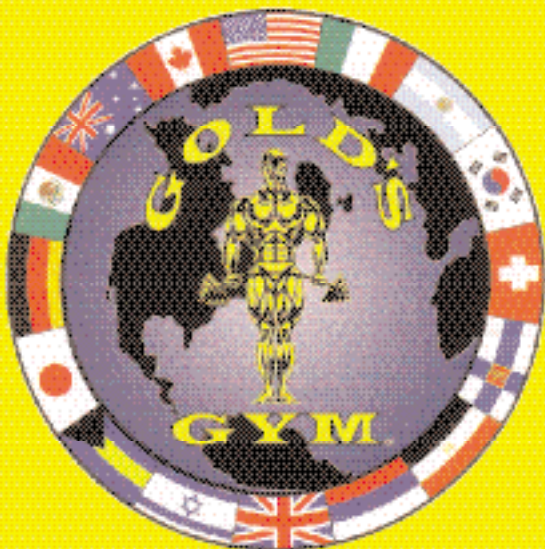
Because of the nature of Noah's Ark's funding, most of the planned facilities will remain a dream for some time to come. The facility's needs read like a Christmas wish list for an entire family. But Hedgecoth's perseverance and faith have turned a little girl's dream into a thriving reality in Henry County. A testament to her commitment recently could be found in her home, where several baby African tortoises shared space with her family. True to her words, Hedgecoth says they're her favorites.

You can learn more about Noah's Ark through its website at www.noahs-ark.org. Habitats are open to the public, weather permitting. Guests are asked to call (770) 967-0888 before visiting to ensure the habitat is open on a particular day.

Scott Anderson is a freelance writer and a former Henry County resident.

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