

The Collector

"I have always done this," says Jama Hedgecoth, founder of Noah's Ark. "This was not a decision that I made to do, it was my destination. It's what I was created to do."

Hedgecoth is a voice and a beacon of hope for two groups who can't speak for themselves: children and animals. Her lifelong penchant for rescuing abused, injured and orphaned animals manifested in 1978 when she and her husband, Charlie, opened Noah's Ark on a small lot of land. In 1990, after a generous donation, they moved to their current location. Located on 250 acres in Locust Grove, Noah's Ark has an animal rehabilitation center, a training and administrative building, a children's home, animal habitats and walking trails.

The nonprofit is run entirely on donations. "Everything is paid for here, all of our land, all of our buildings, and we don't go in debt," Hedgecoth says. "We wait for a sponsor to come out and say, 'I want to build you a barn.' And that's great. Or they want to build a home for the pregnant teens. So that's how we grow."

Donations also come in the form of volunteers. Doctors, veterinarians, electricians, plumbers and builders have all donated their time at Noah's Ark. "Over half of our work force is strictly volunteers," Hedgecoth says.

There are approximately a thousand animals at Noah's Ark. They range from horses and goats to buffalo, a leopard and lemurs. There's even the unlikely trio of a lion, a tiger and a bear who share the same habitat because they were rescued together and suffer anxiety if separated.

The children, who number between 12 and 24, also

work with the animals, but it's something they must earn. "It's a privilege that you get to spend time with the animals," Hedgecoth says. "When they come here, they want the privilege of being able to care for the animals, and that's an earned right."

Hedgecoth's plans for Noah's Ark include a larger home for the children, a home for the elderly, a worship center and a home for the terminally ill. But she isn't in a hurry. "When the finances come in, that's when we'll do it," she says.

"I have two addictions," Hedgecoth says with a smile. "I don't drink, I don't smoke and I don't fool around on my husband. I collect animals and children."

Noah's Ark is open to visitors Tuesday through Saturday. Admission is free, but contributions are appreciated. Visit www.noahs-ark.org or call 770.957.0888 for more information.

