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Noah's Ark prepares for charity event

Seeks support for animal rehabilitation

Members of the non-profit, Noah's Ark Animal Rehabilitation Center and Children's Care Home are gearing up for their Third Annual "A Night at the Ark" charity event.

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Photo by Johnny Jackson Emu interact at Noah's Ark Animal Rehabilitation Center in Locust Grove.

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Members of the non-profit, Noah's Ark Animal Rehabilitation Center and Children's Care Home are gearing up for their Third Annual "A Night at the Ark" charity event.

The event, to be held on Oct. 9, is part of efforts to raise funds in support of the organization's mission to care for, and rehabilitate, animals, while educating the public about preserving natural habitats and the animals that make them their home.

Leaders of the organization, while facing steep economic challenges, are hoping to defray the mounting cost associated with caring for a rising number of animals in need, with the continued support of the local community.

"Like a lot of other people, we feel the effects of the economy," said Jama Hedgecoth, the founder and director of Noah's Ark. "Many people have lost jobs, have had to trim their budgets — and, unfortunately, that cuts into their ability to give. We are so grateful to those who continue to remember Noah's Ark and give what they are able."

The animal rehabilitation center, in Locust Grove, houses some 1,300 animals, from lions, tigers and bears, to horses, cows and potbelly pigs, said Diane Smith, assistant to the director at Noah's Ark.

Noah's Ark spends \$12,000 each month to feed the animals, said Smith, noting that the amount excludes veterinarian care and other expenses associated with the upkeep of the center and its various animal habitats.

Last spring, the center added three tigers to its menagerie, including Sheila, Suki, and Shalimar, who are retired from the circus. Smith said the tigers are affectionately known as "Charlie's Angels," named after Noah's Ark co-founder, Charlie Hedgecoth.

Shannon Daniel, a second-grade teacher at East Lake Elementary School, participates in an annual field trip to Noah's Ark.

With about 120 second-graders in tow, Daniel plans to return to Noah's Ark next spring to see the center's new exhibit showcasing the tigers, who join an existing group of big cats at the animal rehabilitation center. In 2001, Noah's Ark received a lion cub, Leo, and a tiger cub, Shere Khan, as well as a bear cub, named Baloo — all raised together.

Noah's Ark offers opportunities for students to get close to animals they might not be able to approach elsewhere, said Daniel, the second-grade chairperson of curriculum and instruction at East Lake. She and her fellow teachers use the annual field trip to Noah's Ark as a real-life, interactive showcase of wild life in nature — a part of their science curriculum unit on life cycles.

"It's a great field trip," Daniel said. "That's just an experience that a lot of children will never, ever get anywhere else. The kids have a great time."

The teacher added that the field trips have been cost-effective over the years, in the face of education-funding cuts, because admission into the animal rehabilitation center is free of charge. "It is free," said Daniel. "All they're asking for is donations."

Diane Smith said, in addition to monetary support, the organization could use more support through volunteerism. "We always need volunteers in our habitats," she said.

Thirty individuals volunteer on a regular basis at the center, which sees an estimated 100,000 visitors each year, according to Smith. And about 80 percent of those visitors are local, within the metro Atlanta region, Smith said.

Locals may know best the story of Noah's Ark, and the mission of the Hedgecoth family. Smith said Noah's Ark — with roots dating back more than 30 years — has become a well-known and respected refuge for abused and neglected children and animals.

The Hedgecoth family opened the original center on a small Ellenwood farm in 1978, and moved it to its current, 250-acre location, at 712 LG-Griffin Road in Locust Grove, in 1990.

Smith said those interested in taking part in the third annual charity fund-raising event, which will begin at 6 p.m., on Oct. 9, should make reservations by Oct. 1. Tickets are available at \$50 for adults and \$25 for children, 12 and under.

To make a reservation, or to learn more, call Noah's Ark at (770) 957-0888, or visit the web site at www.noahs-ark.org.

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