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CAROL BUCKLEY and SCOTT BLAIS

Providing a Home in Tennessee for the World's Gentlest Giants

By Katey Pfeil



Just an hour-and-a-half's drive southwest of Nashville, Tennessee lies a city called Hohenwald (population approximately 4,000), where the glitz and glam of America's country/western music capital feels more than a thousand miles away. In fact, all ties to showbiz, with its glitter and applause, are nowhere to be seen. Welcome to The Elephant Sanctuary, a safe-haven (or heaven, if you will) founded by Carol Buckley and Scott Blais for old, sick and

needy elephants who have been rescued from zoos and circuses. Provided with a place to call home while they live out their lives in peace and tranquility, it is, as Buckley writes, for "those who have lost their natural family."

On The Elephant Sanctuary website, Buckley relays her frustration concerning the inhumane treatment of elephants in captivity: "It is disappointing that elephants live in zoos and circuses, chained for days and months on end, forced to live in restricted spaces with no resemblance of anything natural. They simply exist to entertain the public. The Sanctuary elephants have freedom to do what they want, when they want, where they want. The decisions that are made about their lives are theirs to make."

Carol Buckley, the primary founder of the center, was a college student studying exotic animal care when she took a break from her homework one day to gaze out the window, only to find a 700-lb. elephant strolling past her house. A local business man had bought the female Asian elephant named Tarra to use as a promotional object for his store. Buckley, who had fallen in love with Tarra from the start, took care of the growing elephant and eventually bought her.

Buckley taught her adventure-loving elephant numerous tricks (such as roller skating and hula), and over the course of the next 20 years the pair traveled circus, zoo, and theme park venues and even appeared in television and movie roles; until one day, she realized that perhaps Tarra should just be an elephant. No more crowds, no more tricks, no more traveling. It was this realization that led Buckley to establish the Sanctuary, welcoming other female elephants who shared Tarra's "performing" past.

Since co-founding The Elephant Sanctuary, Buckley has also been an integral figure in the animal conservation world, developing educational demonstrations for many North American zoos, and her impressive scope of knowledge also includes expertise in elephant medical care and management.

Scott Blais, Buckley's business partner and friend in elephant conservation, helped Buckley co-found the Sanctuary in 1995. (Blais was one of Tarra's trainers while she and Buckley had been performing.) Blais had been caring for elephants for over 15 years, and spent five years as an elephant keeper at Ontario's African Lion Safari. As his expertise lay in elephant training, care and breeding, his primary role at the Sanctuary became that of operations director and caregiver. At the Sanctuary, he has been instrumental in designing and directing the 2,700-acre natural-habitat, as well as constructing 20-miles of exterior fencing.

Both Buckley and Blaise have received recognition for their outstanding work at the Sanctuary. Among the various television shows that have highlighted the Sanctuary's achievements is the award-winning PBS Nature documentary "*Urban Elephants*." They've also been named "Heroes of the Planet" by *Time* magazine for their work at the Sanctuary.

Upon arrival at the sanctuary, both Asian and African elephants are granted the freedom to roam the acres of lush forests, green pastures and spring-fed pond areas. For most, if not all of the elephants, this will be the first time in their entire lives that freedom and happiness are theirs to experience; a sad truth, especially in light of the fact that elephants are among some of the most intelligent and perceptive of all animals and have incredible memory capabilities. From the moment the elephants arrive at the Sanctuary they call the shots - even deciding when they will exit the trailer and explore their new home.

Currently, the permanent residents of the Sanctuary are all female (although 2008 saw the arrival of Ned - a 21-year-old severely emaciated male elephant - who was rescued from a circus owner in Florida and provided a temporary home while he regained his weight). No male elephants reside at the sanctuary because elephants are matriarchal in the wild, living in herds of related females only. Since the Sanctuary's main goal is to simulate (as closely as possible) the elephants' natural environment, male elephants are not allowed.

In keeping with the spirit of a true animal haven that encourages the elephants' natural behavior and respects their solitude, the Sanctuary is not open to the public. However, animal lovers can watch the Sanctuary's elephants by accessing the "*EleCam*," or read about them on The Elephant Sanctuary's website.

As Buckley notably writes, "Elephants are a nation unto themselves. By helping elephants, we are also helping people to understand the interconnectedness of all creatures."

FAST FACTS

The Elephant Sanctuary

www.elephants.com

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Editor's note: As of March 17, 2010, it was announced that The Elephant Sanctuary is seeking a new CEO as Carol Buckley is relinquishing those duties. Ms. Buckley will continue to oversee the organization's programs.



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