

Making a Difference: Shy Wolf Sanctuary providing a service none other can

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I always write about people helping people in this column, but this time our focus is on people helping animals, or maybe it's the other way around.

We love our animals and welcome pets into our homes as treasured family members. While we think of dogs and cats as the most common pets, some people prefer to keep an exotic pet such as a monkey, python, wolf or wolfdog. With them come some pretty major responsibilities most of which are well beyond the scope of most pet owners, and that's where they run into problems.

Enter the Shy Wolf Sanctuary, Education and Experience Center to the rescue — literally. They've been offering sanctuary to abandoned and abused animals ever since rescuing Moondance, a black Asian leopard, 22 years ago. Nancy Smith, and husband Kent, heard that "Moonie" lost a leg in an accident. They took her home and cared for her in an enclosure in their own backyard.

Fast forwarding to today, Shy Wolf, now incorporated as a nonprofit agency, is home to more than 50 rescued animals — wolves, wolfdogs, foxes, prairie dogs, big cats, tortoises and more. These are animals with nowhere else to go. And they are all still housed in enclosures right there in Nancy and Kent's Golden Gate Estates backyard.

A big part of the Shy Wolf Sanctuary's mission is education. I first learned of them 10 years ago during a stop at Manatee Elementary School for a School Zone TV show shoot for the Collier County School District. We videotaped a classroom visit by a Shy Wolf volunteer and her friend, a wolf.

The "shy wolf" name puzzled me at the time. But what I learned was wolves are exceedingly shy, and the Shy Wolf educational programs stress that these are not the "big bad wolves" they're made out to be in fairy tales and movies.

"They are highly social, intelligent and important members of the ecosystem," says Sue Stefanelli, Shy Wolf's volunteer coordinator. A visit to the sanctuary will prove her point.

You are welcome to schedule an animal encounter by visiting www.bookeo.com/shywolfsanctuary.

Christina Elwell went because she loves animals: "I learned about wolf behavior and my favorite memory was of being able to pet them and hear them all howl together."

When I was there, the howling in unison was cool but not quite as impressive as the affection being shared between the animals and their caretakers.

Caring for the animals is a labor of love for Stefanelli.

"I am fortunate to have found a huge purpose for my life. I have been able to develop some of the most intense relationships I've ever had with the wolves," she said.

Volunteer Teresa Schultz spends two days a week cleaning enclosures, walking, brushing and feeding the animals while also hugging and kissing them.

"There is no greater feeling than when one decides to be your friend," Schultz said.

Volunteer Kristen Labuziensi credits Shy Wolf with bringing her a great deal of happiness: "Forming a bond with a wolf is a magical experience. These wild animals accept you into their pack and you become one of them."

If you'd like to volunteer, send an email to volunteer@shywolfsanctuary.com.

To "join the pack" as a member, donor or sponsor, to assist with medical expenses for new rescues or to buy one of their cool calendars, go to www.shywolfsanctuary.com. There you'll also learn about plans for a move to a larger location.

And a word of caution, "don't try this at home!" While wolves can be safely interacted with at the sanctuary, never approach one in the wild or in your backyard.

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