

Where the wild things are: Abused and foster children visit Shy Wolf Sanctuary

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“It’s kind of hot, but it’s pretty cool,” said Rider. The young man’s comment — no last names were given for the protection of the children in the program — summed up the visit. About 15 boys and girls from the Children’s Network of Southwest Florida, abused or neglected children who had been removed from their parents’ custody, paid a visit on Aug. 15 to the Shy Wolf Sanctuary in Golden Gate Estates.

The day was warm, but the shaded arbors of the sanctuary, full of fenced-in spaces providing habitat for a wildly diverse group of wild animals, offered protection from the sun as the children got the tour. They posed for “selfies” with gopher tortoises held by Shy Wolf volunteers, and giggled and jumped back when a tortoise chose that moment to “go number one” — you can’t housebreak a tortoise.

They gathered around the enclosures — with covered dens, plantings, open space and wading pools, “cages” wouldn’t do their accommodations justice — as Jeremy Albrecht, one of the sanctuary’s directors, told them about the creatures inside, including raccoons, prairie dogs, a Florida panther and a rare South American crab-eating fox.

And one by one, the children got the chance to get up close and personal with a wolf, gazing into their yellow eyes and reaching out to pet them, as the handlers held the animals’ leads. The kids were a little wary, and so were the wolves; the group of children and chaperones was larger than the typical party touring through Shy Wolf.

Some of the children, including a girl named Rose, were content to keep the animals at arms' length, but in others, including an 18-year-old boy named Alex, the encounter seemed to provide a spark.

“Look at him — he’s got some connection with these animals,” said Albrecht. Technically, the creatures are “wolf-dogs,” hybrids between the two species, with varying percentages of each bloodline.

“We have to call them all wolf-dogs, but some of them are every bit wolf,” said Shy Wolf Sanctuary founder Nancy Smith. She said there was a natural affinity between the kids in the Children’s Network and the animals at Shy Wolf. “These animals have been hit, starved and dumped. And these kids have had a hard time. Some of them don’t have any parents at all, or anyone to call their own. I feel we have a lot in common, as we both strive to provide unconditional love, care, support and advocacy for the lives entrusted to us.

Nadereh Salim, CEO of Children’s Network, agreed.

“I’m hoping this beautiful experience can be made available to other kids as well. Their life stories are quite similar. Studies have shown that traumatized children often benefit from interaction and companionship with dogs, by learning compassion, responsibility and a sense of purpose,” she said. “Any time we can provide positive interaction, it’s healing and therapeutic.

“Look at that girl. Her supervisor said she had never seen her this calm — normally she’s disruptive. I think these kids have totally forgotten their own concerns.”

The children were laughing at the antics of Rocket the raccoon, mesmerized, having fun and learning all at the same time. They marveled at Cimarron the panther, laughed at the prairie dogs, and listened while Albrecht explained the differences in body and tail of a crab-eating fox, allowing it to reach out from the shoreline to grab its seafood dinner without falling in.

But the best part of the visit came when Albrecht and the other trainers invited the children to howl. As each kid got into it and let go with a howl, the wolves, or wolf-dogs, or whatever they are, joined in with a wailing, discordant chorus, creating an eerie sound that would raise the hackles of a reindeer or an elk.

Shy Wolf Sanctuary, said Smith, is initiating a program that will bring more foster and at-risk children to the shelter. They have been providing a safe and nurturing home to neglected, abandoned and injured animals since 1993, and are looking for land and funds to expand to larger quarters.

For more info about the Shy Wolf Sanctuary Education & Experience Center, log onto www.shywolfsanctuary.com or call 855-SHY-WOLF.

For more info about the Children's Network of Southwest Florida, log onto www.childnetswfl.org or call 239-226-1524.

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