

Mystic Jungle

JULY 2013 WINNER - 3,378 VOTES

Spike is the biggest of the big cats. With legs the size of tree trunks, this Siberian tiger weighs more than 700 lbs.

But pretty soon, Spike will have a little more room to stretch out. Mystic Jungle Educational Facility won the \$1,000 prize for July's SunState Federal Credit Union and Tower Publications's Charity of the Month Contest. It received 3,378 votes on Facebook.

Mystic Jungle Educational Facility is a conservation facility that houses exotic animals, such as cougars, alligators and rhesus monkeys. The \$1,300 (that includes the \$300 prize for nomination) is going toward Spike's new half-acre enclosure, which will allow other residents to move to bigger enclosures, as well.

Co-founders Vera and Mark Chaples started the facility, based in Live Oak. The couple have decades

of experience working with animals, including Vera's over-thirty years of experience as a veterinary technician and Mark's lifetime



of ranching. The transition toward Mystic Jungle began 18 years ago when Vera worked at a practice that specialized in exotic animals.

As ownership laws changed, many exotic pet owners had to surrender their animals, and there weren't many options besides euthanasia.

But Vera and Mark opened their doors.

They began taking in exotic animals, with a focus on big cats, and giving them homes. The goal wasn't to buy, sell or trade, but to care for them permanently. They contacted other specialists to learn, and over time, became the experts themselves. And like that, Mystic Jungle was born. In 2009, it officially became a nonprofit and began to focus on education for the public, as well.

The facility is not a zoo and is not open to the public; however, free tours can be scheduled. Contributions from visitors help support Mystic Jungle, as well as the



facility's weekly yard sale of donated goods.

Currently, one of Mystic Jungle's biggest projects is saving the Asian Leopard, which is being poached at a rate of four per week, Vera said. Mark and Vera plan to go to

India in 2014 to talk with the government about more direct ways to protect the species. And at home, Mystic Jungle helps conserve the leopard through its own breeding program.

Today, Mystic Jungle is still growing, but its mission remains the same.

"Our animals don't do tricks. It's not a sideshow," Vera said. "I'm teaching." ■

Learn more at www.facebook.com/MysticJungleEducationalFacilityInc.

TO NOMINATE A CHARITY OF YOUR CHOICE OR TO VOTE FOR YOUR FAVORITE NOMINEES, VISIT:

www.facebook.com/SunStateFCU

and click on "Charity of the Month".

