

Florida's ***Friendly Giants***

The Story of a Wild Williston Ranch

BY COURTNEY LINDWALL

The sign for Two Tails Ranch stands at the front of a long dirt road in rural North Florida. A little past that — there are the elephants.

On a nearly hidden swatch of grassy land in Williston, animal expert Patricia Zerbini privately owns and runs her 73-acre elephant sanctuary.

A 43,000-pound group of friendly giants currently lives on the property — a total of four elephants. At times, Zerbini has had as many as 62 at once. Overall, just fewer than

300 have come through her gates.

“Each one is an individual. You have to treat them like individuals,” she said. “There are smart ones, dumb ones, sweet ones and nasty ones.”

Since she was a little girl, Zerbini has always been a little bit wild.

She is a ninth-generation exotic animal trainer who traveled the world with her father, Tarzan Zerbini. He owned the Zerbini Circus and was world-renowned for his work with big cats, such as lions and tigers.

Her grandfather, Charles Zerbini, and his brothers were also in the

circus business. They were the first circus to cross the Sahara Desert in the early 20th century.

“They were escaping from the wars,” she said.

Zerbini lived in France with her grandmother while she attended school as a child and would then travel with her father over the summer.

“They were performers,” she said. “But to me it was just their job.”

For Zerbini, exotic animals have always been a part of the routine.

“It was the same as any other job, except my family was a lot more connected,” she said.

PHOTO BY COURTNEY LINDWALL

Bunny has been at the Two Tails Ranch since 1977, longer than the other elephants.





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Patricia Zerbini and Roxy the elephant stand in the pen while guests hand-feed Roxy carrots — although her favorite food is watermelon.

Though she was surrounded by all different kinds of animals growing up, elephants became her passion, she said. She laughs now about choosing to work with the biggest animals of the bunch.

"I must have some kind of brain defect," she joked. "I just really have a soft spot for them."

Two Tails Ranch itself began in 1984, and not too long after, the elephants started marching in.

Although Zerbini has her own elephants, the ranch also acts as a boarding facility for others. It is the only privately owned elephant boarding facility in the United States.

If circuses, zoos or other sanctuaries need a temporary home for their animals, they can give her a call. Disasters, such as Hurricane Andrew for example, brought pachyderms without facilities over to Zerbini, who some call the elephant whisperer.

"There ain't no whispering," she said. "Sometimes I'm hollering."

Zerbini bases her training on the natural instincts of elephants in the wild, she said. She uses energy and body language to communicate, like she would do with any animal.

In both her ranch's herd and her family of four sons, Zerbini is the leader and matriarch.

"Whether it's the elephants or the kids, they don't argue with me," she said. "I trained my boys the same way I do my elephants."

It has a lot to do with confidence and control, Zerbini said.

"You have to be extremely sure of yourself before any animal will trust you."

Zerbini said there is one sure way to tell if an elephant trusts you 100 percent – if you can get it to lie down on command.

As a position of complete vulnerability, it is the hardest thing

to teach them. But, she said, it is the first thing a trainer needs to do.

With a couple of strong orders, Zerbini can command her 6-ton behemoths to lumber slowly down to the ground and lie on their sides, where they simply wait for her next directions.

The four elephants currently at Two Tails are Bunny, Roxy, Luke and Rajah.

Bunny, who came along in 1977, and Roxy, who followed in 1988, are Zerbini's longest-owned elephants.

Roxy is bigger and hairier than most female Asian elephants, weighing nearly 10,000 pounds. And Bunny is most active in the rain. The girls do tend to "argue," though, Zerbini said.

"Both my females hate each other."

Rajah is a newer addition, coming to the ranch within the last year, and tends to have an attitude.



PHOTO BY COURTNEY LINDWALL

LEFT: Luke the Asian elephant shows off his painting skills during one the ranch's group tours, which are held every day but Thursday at Two Tails Ranch.

RIGHT: Zerbini's two zebras, Pierre and Tache, munch on hay in their pen near the gift shop. The ranch owns a small group of exotic animals besides elephants, including tortoises, zebras, ostrich, emu and Amazon parrots.

But the star at Two Tails is Luke — the famous painting elephant; a 12,000-pound, 10.5-foot-tall Picasso.

He picked up the hobby one day when Zerbini's boys were playing around with an easel and paint in the barn. They handed Luke the brush, which he uses his trunk to hold on to, and an artist was born.

During visitor tours at Two Tails, Luke always paints for the crowd. T-shirts and canvases with his abstract art are sold at the ranch's shop. He paints nearly every day and "just gets all giddy" when he is doing it.

Zerbini raises money for her ranch by giving tours to the public and by having her elephants appear at events, she said. They do circuses, fairs, educational programs, commercials, Indian weddings and even Republican functions.

Locally, the elephants usually head out to Williston's annual Central Florida Peanut Festival in October and Gainesville's Spring Festival, as well.

Even though there are times when she takes the elephants with her to travel, most days Zerbini and

her animals lead a typical ranch life.

"Christmas? Doesn't matter. The animals need to eat," said Colin Fraser, a close friend of Zerbini who works at Two Tails, giving tours and helping with the day-to-day operations.

Fraser graduated from Santa Fe College's zoology program in Gainesville. After working at zoos, he came to Zerbini's ranch and realized how differently they were run.

"At zoos, it's a 9-to-5 — not a way of life," he said.

Zerbini is out every day working with the elephants herself. She is up in the morning for feeding. She is grazing the elephants through the woods in the afternoon. And in the middle of the night, she is the one checking to make sure they are OK, Fraser said. Her home is on the property, with windows that overlook the pens and barns, so she can keep an eye on her animals.

Fraser said that zoos nowadays do not work that way — and the animals are worse off because of it.

"They try to run it like a corporation," he said. "You can't run an animal facility like a corporation."

He found in his time working at zoos that the ones making the big decisions are business people, not animal people. The zoo curators are now less likely to live onsite, as well, Fraser said.

But that has never been how Zerbini works with animals.

Since she was a little girl growing up in her family's circus, the animals are what consume her time — day in and day out. She lives among them.

"I have no life, basically. It's them," Zerbini said.

But it is that level of commitment that has allowed Zerbini to become as connected with her elephants as she now is.

"Wherever I am on the property, that's where they want to be," she said.

If their needs are met, they do not want to run away. Zerbini could put a string up, and they would not try to go past it.

But how well you do at elephant training depends on how much dedication you put into it, she said.

For Zerbini — it has been a lifetime. ■