

A MODERN-DAY DOCTOR DOOLITTLE

One young man's passion for animals resulted in a sanctuary open for tours.

by Rona Gindin

They laugh now, but surely Philip Merryweather's parents didn't chuckle when, at 12, their son walked around with a boa constrictor around his neck and a shoulder-high Great Dane at his side. Or when, at 16, the teenager played hooky from the family restaurant so he could nurse an injured bird at home.

By the time Merryweather opened the gates to the family property for one day – just one day – so interested neighbors could take a look at his animal menagerie, his parents were more used to the idea that their prodigy had a Doctor Doolittle-like way with animals. And when 5,000 people showed up that day to gawk – “I thought, ‘How many

people are going to get? Maybe 200?’” – the elder Merryweathers realized they'd better look elsewhere for restaurant staffers.

Without trying, without planning, but with an enormous love of animals and a yen to care for injured ones, Merryweather built up a destination that is now known as Philip's Animal Garden.

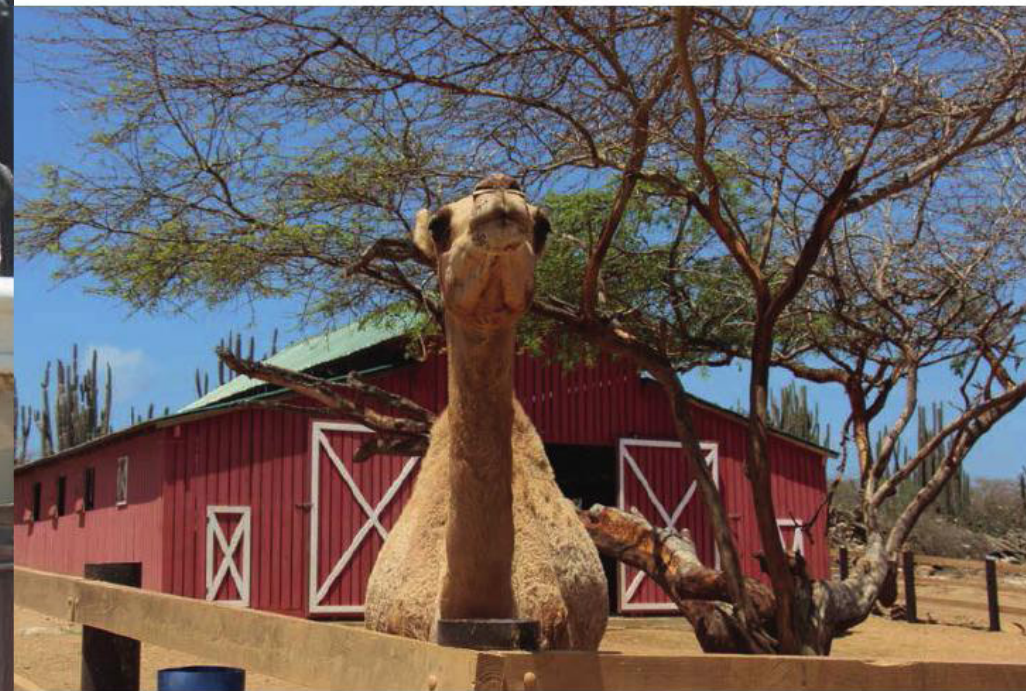
Located adjacent to his family home in the wilds of Alto Vista, Philip's Animal Garden is now a 60,000-square-meter destination with eight employees tending to 600 animals of 72 species, including monkeys, ocelots and the wild cat puma jaguarondi. The property

is a farm, too, producing about 85 percent of the animals' food. Visitors have use of an information center, a cafeteria, a gazebo, and indoor and outdoor seating. “We're constantly growing,” an enthusiastic Merryweather says now, at 30. “Next we want solar panels. I'm saving up.”

When guests arrive, they pay \$10 (\$5 for children) at the information center, then take a guided tour. They're free to roam once the tour is done. “People have to take the tour first because then they realize not to scream or throw food at the animals. The tour changes their mentality,” Merryweather explains.

The animal garden, known locally just as Philip's, as in, “Let's go to Philip's,” truly came around organically. As a youngster, the now-entrepreneur became the community's go-to when, say, a pelican got stuck on a barbed wire. He'd be expected at Driftwood or Red Fish, his parents' enterprises, but stayed home. “I couldn't be at the restaurant smiling at people knowing I had an injured animal back home,” he recalls. “It's like being at work while your kid's sick at school.”

The lad “never said no” when asked for help and ended up keeping all but stray dogs and cats, which he adopted out. Once he opened the gate that first time, locals, including taxi drivers giving island tours, began asking for a peek. “Boom! Done!” he laughs. “People would knock on my door saying ‘Hey, can we look around?’ This happened every day – every single day!”



As the four-legged and feathered population grew, Merryweather asked to lease adjacent government land and eventually was granted his request. Mending the animals and keeping them fed is expensive, so Merryweather found a variety of ways to raise funds. What started as a tour on one jeep has turned into paid tours on three jeeps and an ATV. After arranging to have brochures placed in rental cars, he charged other businesses to add their brochures to his. Then Merryweather designed a map for those rental cars and began charging to put ads on the cap and to help with printing costs. The profits go to support the animals.

As for his parents and their restaurants – all turned out OK. Their other son, Herbert Jr., graduated from college and stepped into the dining room.

Philip's Animal Garden is at Alto Vista # 116, Noord. It's open daily from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Un Doctor Doolittle moderno

Una pasión de un hombre joven resultó un santuario abierto para tours.

por Rona Gindin

Ahora ríen, pero seguramente los padres de Philip Merryweather no lo hicieron cuando a los 12 años su hijo entró con una boa constrictor alrededor del cuello y un Gran Danés que le llegaba al hombro. O cuando el adolescente de 16 jugado novillos dejó el restaurante de la familia para poder cuidar a un pájaro herido en casa.

Para el tiempo en el que Merryweather abrió las puertas de la propiedad familiar –solo por un día– para que los vecinos interesados pudieran dar un vistazo a su colección de animales salvajes, sus padres estaban más que acostumbrados a la idea de que su hijo prodigio tenía una conexión en forma de Dr. Doolittle con los animales. Y cuando 5.000 personas se presentaron ese día para curiosear, pensaron: ¿Cuántas personas van a conseguir? ¿Tal vez 200? Los ancianos Merryweather se dieron cuenta de que sería mejor buscar en otra parte empleados para el restaurante.

Sin intentar, sin planeación, pero con un enorme amor a los animales y un don para cuidar de los heridos, Merryweather construyó una atracción que ahora es conocida como Philip's Animal Garden.

