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Niguel Neighbors

Debbie L. Sklar

Local Woman Eases Suffering of Wild Birds

• **PEOPLE:** She says charities have been hit hard since Sept. 11, and 'underdog' charities like hers have done even worse.

It happened by fluke – really.

I was hunting for story ideas on the 'Net when I came across the name Linda Evans crossed with the city of Laguna Niguel. It said something about being involved in a wildlife project and saving birds. I couldn't understand why Evans of 1980s "Dynasty" television fame was living in Laguna Niguel. Not that the city isn't a pretty place to reside, but I thought for sure she was in Los Angeles.

Next thing I knew, I was sending an e-mail and she was writing back saying she'd love to do an interview. When we finally decided on a time, I realized that she wasn't THE Linda Evans; however, her work (in my opinion) is much more important.

This Linda Evans actually goes by Linda Evans-McLeod I later learned and she was born in a rural city in Florida. She has lived in Laguna Niguel since 1970 and is the founder, executive director and wildlife care specialist of the Pacific Wildlife Project.

PWP is a "grass roots" organization founded in 1985 by Evans-McLeod, caring citizens, veterinarians and wildlife biologist who saw a need to provide a haven for injured wild animals. Adopting a humane approach to wildlife rescue and care, the PWP is committed to helping all species of wildlife displaced, injured or victimized through human confrontations, she said.

Entering through the gates of Evans-McLeod's home, I thought perhaps I had taken a wrong turn – I could have been at a small zoo or



Photo by DEBBIE SKLAR

"MR. P": Resident Linda Evans-McLeod, founder of Pacific Wildlife Project, poses with "Mr. P," a beautiful white pelican in her back yard that she helped rehabilitate after near-starvation.

animal farm. The front yard was filled with lush foliage, but it was the back yard that was so impressive. I encountered both sick and injured wild birds everywhere: a goose here, a cormorant there, mourning doves snoozing in incubators, night herons, hopping and screeching. But mostly there are brown pelicans, (as well as a few beautiful white pelicans) standing tall on wooden stumps and posts, watching the action.

For more than three decades, Evans-McLeod who is in her 50s has been caring for such beautiful feathered friends, found sick, starving, or injured. In 1986 she and her then-veterinarian/biologist husband, set up the PWP. Their garage became a clinic – their back yard, a pelican habitat aviary.

"I'm not surprised that I do what I do," she said. "I just do it because it seems natural. When I was a kid my family had restaurants and we were always exposed to the public. People were always coming in with animals to adopt and we had animals at home, too. If it wasn't a dog or two, it was a squirrel, a baby bird ..."

Evans-McLeod said she initially wanted a career in the arts, but she became a mother instead.

"Funny thing is that my daughter, Kara, is doing what I always longed to do – she works in the theater and teaches classes in LA at the fashion institute."

Instead Evans-McLeod raised her daughter while volunteering along side the "Hummingbird Lady" in Newport Beach in the early 1980s.

"I started out volunteering one day a week and before I knew it, it was seven. I loved it, it was fascinating," she recalled.

After doing her time with the Hummingbird Lady, she met a local veterinarian and worked for him for about eight years as a technician. She became licensed to treat wildlife by the State of California in 1978 and she hasn't looked back.

Evans-McLeod kept PWP alive after she divorced the veterinarian.

"I just kept going after we split and it just grew," she recalled. "We started with a handful of volunteers, now I rely on 40 of them with more than 150 on the list that come and go."

Evans-McLeod spends her days rescuing orphaned and injured wildlife – no birds of pray – and small mammals, which eventually make their way to the Irvine Animal Shelter. At the shelter, they complete rehab and are sent back into the wild.

"While we treat a variety, we're mostly known for our work with pelicans," she said. "We have treated more pelicans here than any other place in the world – 5,000 of them – since 1993."

In fact, Evans reports that the PWP's recovery rate for pelicans is 90 percent, and 75 percent for baby birds. She's also had the opportunity to help a baby raccoon that was attacked and left for dead by a dog, and Mr. P., a big white pelican that was starved to death, to name only a few success stories.

The PWP rescues pelicans from Los Angeles to Malibu to San Onofre, she said. "I continue to do this because I love the animals," she said.

"I feel as if I am doing something worthwhile and I have always had a soft spot for the underdog. I feel empathy for people that are less fortunate and I feel the same for animals."

Incidentally, the project is funded by a small stipend and personal donations, which Evans said have been short in 2003.

"Since 9-11 a lot of charities have suffered, especially ours because it's the underdog of charities," she said. "Animals charities, especially for the wild, are the last on the list, unfortunately."

As for the future of the PWP, Evans said she couldn't see herself stopping any time soon. After all, who would take her place, I thought? To be honest, after seeing and listening to what she has accomplished, I'm not anyone could step in. What an extraordinary woman indeed.

The hardest part of all this she said is, "Seeing the animals suffer," while the best part is, "Watching them fly away and head back into the wild."

For more information, donations or volunteering, please check the Web site at www.PACIFICWILDLIFE.ORG or call 949/440-6247.