

When Sissy was born in 1968 in Thailand, she had no idea what kind of hard life was ahead of her. At one year old, the Asian elephant was ripped from her mother and extended family and brought to the United States to begin a life of living in zoo after zoo, suffering cramped spaces, a near-death experience and even abuse at the hands of some of her keepers.

In 1981, she was one of the animals swept away from the Frank Buck Zoo in Gainesville, Texas, in record flood waters. She was presumed dead, but when floodwaters began to recede someone spotted her trunk wrapped around a tree limb. It was the only part of her body above water. If a human were to go through such an ordeal, they would be treated for the trauma as well as the physical injuries. Sissy was put back in her enclosure.

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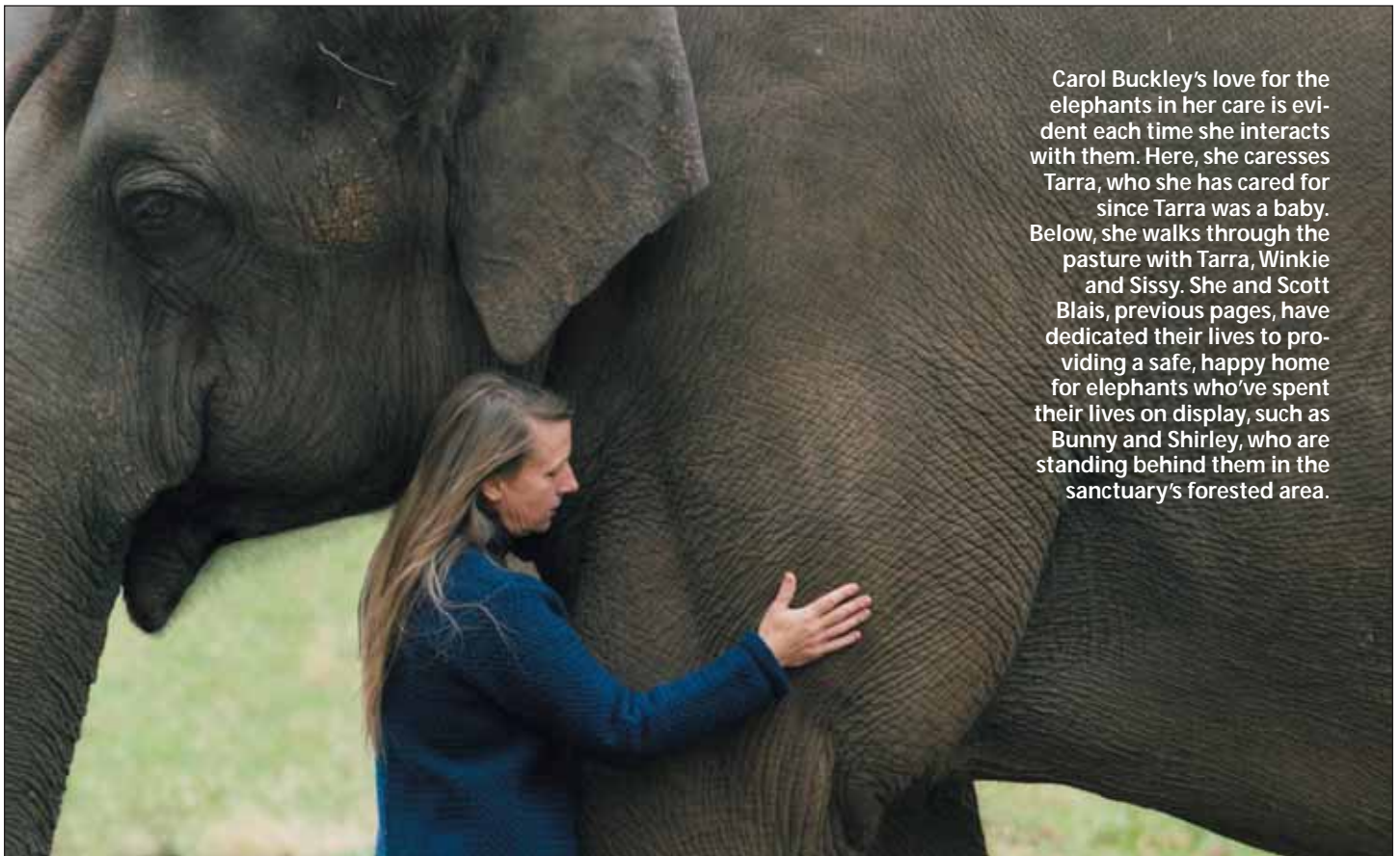
The Elephant Sanctuary provides happy endings for old, sick a

Story by Trish Milburn • Photographs by Robin Conover



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and abused elephants



Carol Buckley's love for the elephants in her care is evident each time she interacts with them. Here, she caresses Tarra, who she has cared for since Tarra was a baby. Below, she walks through the pasture with Tarra, Winkie and Sissy. She and Scott Blais, previous pages, have dedicated their lives to providing a safe, happy home for elephants who've spent their lives on display, such as Bunny and Shirley, who are standing behind them in the sanctuary's forested area.

Sissy's sad history doesn't stop there. A keeper was later found dead in her enclosure, and while there are no witnesses there was speculation that she may have been acting out against abuse. A couple more moves brought her to the El Paso Zoo, where again she was beaten by her handlers. When video of these beatings hit the local news, the public outcry was overwhelming. That outcry was what finally allowed Sissy's situation to change for the better.

Sissy is one of eight Asian elephants who now call The Elephant Sanctuary near Hohenwald home — the best one they've known since their lives of captivity began. She's part of an amazing success story. When *The Tennessee Magazine* first featured the sanctuary, served by Meriwether Lewis Electric Cooperative, in June 1996, it only had 112 acres, two resident elephants and two keepers, co-founders and co-directors Carol Buckley and Scott Blais. In December 2003, Buckley and Blais were overseeing a staff of four keepers and three office employees. Sissy roamed 220 acres alongside her buddies Tarra, Jenny, Shirley, Bunny, Winkie and Tina, while the sanctuary's newest arrival, Delhi, watched them from her quarantine area while munching tasty bamboo.

Plans at that time were to open the new African elephant habitat once all the fencing and preparations were completed for the arrival of Zula, Tange and Flora and expand the overall sanctuary to 2,700 acres.

The sanctuary is a success story that keeps getting happier.

"The most joy comes from the number of elephants we've saved," Buckley says. "They all have horrific histories and come with a lot of emotional baggage. They're initially guarded when they arrive here, but it's only

a matter of hours before they really change. The elephants communicate, and each time the transition time is shorter."

Buckley says that even elephants that have been aggressive in the past seem to know that things are different when they arrive at the sanctuary. She believes the elephants already there tell the new arrival, "It's okay. You're going to love it here."

Even though not all the elephants went through the traumas Sissy did, their lives in zoos and circuses weren't ideal. Elephants are herd animals, and many captive elephants have to live their lives alone. In the wild, elephants walk 30-50 miles a day. In captivity, their movement is severely curtailed. If they are in a circus environment, they are often chained. Being so confined leads to health problems such as foot rot, the number one killer of elephants in captivity.

Tina, who arrived at the sanctuary in August 2003, is one of the elephants who has suffered from foot problems even though she was well loved and cared for and still has a fan following in Canada since she was a long-time resident of the Greater Vancouver Zoo.

Even Barbara, who was one of the sanctuary's first two elephants, lived much longer than was expected when she arrived at the sanctuary. She had a chronic wasting disease and had been losing weight for a long time when she joined Tarra at the sanctuary. For a time after her arrival, she actually gained weight — perhaps because her life was so much happier. She eventually succumbed to her illness in 2001, five years after arriving at the sanctuary 2,000 pounds underweight.

As evidence of Buckley's assertion that the elephants are like humans in many ways, Sissy became very sad



and depressed after Barbara's death. And Tarra often visits Barbara's grave.

When you talk to Buckley and Blais, you can tell that caring for the elephants isn't just a job. It's a calling. Every action they take and improvement they make is for the elephants' benefit. That includes everything from allowing the elephants to come and go as they please to not allowing visitors at the sanctuary so the animals aren't stressed and can live like elephants should — not on display for daily crowds.

It takes a lot of hours every day to take care of the elephants, but no one seems to mind. Joanna Burke, lead keeper, says working at the sanctuary takes "commitment and a sense of 'I'm supposed to be here'."

You can see the sadness in all their eyes when they talk about elephants they haven't yet been able to bring to the sanctuary, such as the ones who are owned by Delhi's former owner. Delhi's arrival in late November brought the media spotlight back on the sanctuary again. She was the first elephant seized by the U.S. Department of Agriculture under the Animal Welfare Act. Among the reasons Delhi was seized was lack of veterinary care, chemical burns on her feet from where they'd been dipped in undiluted formaldehyde and a serious case of foot rot. Even though her infection is advanced and her care will involve antibiotics and painkillers in essentially a hospice situation, she seems content now as she watches the other elephants, takes naps in the sun and explores her new home. And like the other elephants, she has a devoted following.

To answer the public's desire to see Delhi, Tina and the other elephants, the sanctuary's Web site has the EleCam, a series of video cameras around the sanctuary that give live feeds of the elephants' movements. And plans are in the works to build an education center where visitors could learn more about the sanctuary's special residents.

The dedication Buckley, Blais and the rest of the sanctuary's staff and volunteers hasn't gone unnoticed. They've been featured on The Discovery Channel, PBS, *20/20* and CNN and in classrooms far and wide through their videoconferencing program. Buckley was selected as the guest of honor at the 2001 Genesis Awards which recognize those who've brought the most media attention to their cause. She and Blais were named *Time* magazine Heroes for the Planet in 1998. But the two would never brag about these accomplishments. They want the focus to be on the care of the elephants at the sanctuary and on the plight of those still in captivity. Blais says that even

though some elephants are loved by their owners and keepers, even some of the best zoo situations aren't ideal.

"Zoos don't have enough room to roam," he says. "The elephants also need live vegetation and a proper social group."

People are often surprised by the sanctuary's location, but the Middle Tennessee area is actually much like the elephants'

natural habitat with pastures, wooded areas, streams and ponds. The temperature ranges are also similar. Only in the coldest part of January do the elephants tend to stay inside their heated barn.

As you might expect, caring for a herd of elephants is an expensive undertaking. The Elephant Sanctuary is a nonprofit organization that is funded by donations from individuals and groups. It receives no state or federal funding. Feeding alone takes a good chunk of change. For instance, Sissy, who eats the least of all the elephants, consumes 100 pounds of hay or vegetation, 30 pounds of hand-mixed soaked whole grains and 20 pounds of fruits and vegetables a day. Food, dietary supplements and veterinary care cost about \$1,000 a month per elephant.

There are a variety of ways individuals, businesses and groups can help the sanctuary. Money, of course, is always



Winkie plays with one of the four-wheelers the elephants' keepers use to bring food to the elephants while they're out on the sanctuary grounds.

helpful. You can make a donation for a specific item on the sanctuary's wish list, buy and donate that item, take part in the Feed an Elephant for a Day program or shop in the Our Girls' Gift Shop through the sanctuary's Web site.

For those wanting to make even bigger gifts, request information about becoming a VIP Patron. For a minimum \$1,000 annual gift for five years, you'll not only provide tremendous help to the sanctuary but you'll also receive a behind-the-scenes tour of the sanctuary's grounds and facilities and be able to talk to the staff. But in keeping with the sanctuary's mission, the tour doesn't include interaction with the elephants. If you see them from a distance, it'll be an added bonus.

The sanctuary also has unpaid internships and volunteer days throughout the year. While interns and volunteers are not allowed contact with the elephants, every activity — whether it's painting or tearing down barbwire fencing — helps the sanctuary do more for its current and future residents.

"We've had an incredible volume of growth and success," Buckley says. "We've created a healthy space."

As Buckley hooks up to do a video conference with an elementary school classroom hundreds of miles away, you can tell she's excited about sharing the sanctuary's story with the youngsters. That enthusiasm is good news for the approximately 600 elephants still out there in captivity. The Elephant Sanctuary will never be able to help them all, but Buckley, Blais, Burke and the rest of the sanctuary's staff won't stop anytime soon in their mission for more happy endings and more happy elephants.

Elephant Eden

The Elephant Sanctuary's Web site, www.elephants.com, has a tremendous amount of information, including ways you can help. If you'd like to mail a donation, send it to: The Elephant Sanctuary, P.O. Box 393, Hohenwald, TN 38462.



Hohenwald