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Wild Bunch: troubled SA sanctuary looking to unload hundreds of animals

Enrique Lopetegui
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Ron and Carol Asvestas built it, then screwed it up; next, daughter Nicole García sacked Mom and Dad; then, the new board, led by Jamie and Michelle Anthony-Cryer, sacked García. Such has been the very wild history of the [Wild Animal Orphanage](#). If the cycle is to continue, who will sack the Cryers? That is, if there is a Wild Animal Orphanage left at all.

On August 23, a message was posted by Laurie Gage, big cat specialist for the USDA, on a Google animal-lovers' group. "The Wild Animal Orphanage near San Antonio, Texas is having difficulty caring for their animals," the message read. "They are now trying to find homes for 55 tigers, 14 lions, 3 cougars, 6 wolf hybrids, 2 old (17 years) leopards, and about 200 primates."

Former WAO vice-president and treasurer (and recent volunteer) Kristina Brunner expects the worse. "It looks like the Cryers decided it was too much work to save the WAO, so they have thrown in the towel," she wrote in an email. "My heart is completely broken over this."

Not so fast, cat lady. According to Rob Mitchell, listed as "community relations" man for WAO, the orphanage is alive and, uh, well.

"Are we closing? Not that I know of," Mitchell told the *Current* on Friday. The search for new homes is "a normal function," he said. "That happens all the time. We're not shutting down."

It happens all the time? Really? The 280 animals in need of homes represent more than half of the "approximately 400 animals" WAO claims [in its website](#). Not even at the lowest point during the Asvestas's era did the orphanage attempt such a massive animal exodus.

"No, this is not common," said Gage. "From what I understand, the WAO has had some financial difficulties." (You don't say.) "Our USDA inspector in Texas has been going there frequently to ensure the care of the animals there meets the Animal Welfare Standards. If the facility were to run out of funding, then the animals will need new homes. We are trying to prepare for the worst-case scenario, but hope for the best. Presently all of the animals are owned by the WAO and it [is] up to them as to where they may be placed."

Besides a fine here and there and a state of near-perpetual investigations, authorities as late as May had not found any criminal wrongdoing at WAO.

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“Our office has taken no legal action against this San Antonio facility nor do we anticipate any, at this point,” Tom Kelley, spokesperson for the Texas Office of Attorney General, told [Animal People](#) magazine in May. “We are monitoring their efforts daily, nothing more.”

Those who support the current administration suggest the lack of legal action proves the accusations against the orphanage are greatly exaggerated; hard-line animal lovers blame federal and state agencies and laws for “speciesism,” that is, allowing people to get away with things that, if done to humans, would have landed them in jail.

But ask any of WAO’s leaders about lack of funds or food for the animals and they’ll blame the previous administration. The new board accused García of trying to keep them in the dark about WAO’s finances (even though she insists she never had access to the bank accounts). García blames her parents for destroying the orphanage and claims that, in the six months she was in charge, things were slowly but steadily improving.

My take, after visiting and speaking to different characters in the Wild World of WAO: Nicole and Kristine (and, especially, Kristine), where let go because they were all over peoples’ asses when it came to animal care and management. Based on internal emails I was able to review, every fundraising effort by García to gradually introduce new board members and phase out older ones, were thwarted by the board.

“I think we need to hold off on bringing anyone else onto the board until we have sufficient time to determine what our course of action is going to be,” wrote former board member Sumner Matthes on April 8. “I hope by the middle of next week we will be able to determine what we are going to do about the board’s current or new membership.”

The rest is history. On April 30, García was terminated in what she calls an illegal (there was no quorum, she says) and retaliatory termination.

“[Some workers] kept complaining that Nicole never listened to their fundraising ideas,” Brunner said. “So I’d say, ‘Shoot. Tell me about it.’ And they would come up with these off-the-wall ideas, like having a meat barbecue on WAO’s property. I thought they were out of their minds.”

In a 2009 interview with the *Current*, Lynn Cuny, founder of the model [Wildlife Rescue & Rehabilitation](#) sanctuary near Kendalia, echoed the feelings of the average hardcore animal lover. “If you’re going to be eating one animal in order to raise money to feed another, then I don’t think you’re doing your job and I don’t think you’re holding that really true high standard of what an animal protection organization is and what they stand for.”

WAO’s President of the Board Michelle Anthony-Cryer didn’t return our phone call, and husband Jamie Cryer, listed as director and animal rescue team manager, could not be reached for comment. Even spokesperson Mitchell, who works part-time for WAO on weekends, told me he was at his other job and was “very busy right now.” The numbers he gave me (“there should be somebody at the office right now”) are the same ones listed on WAO’s website. One is not in service; the other one has no answering machine.

“It was all a set-up,” said García, now a bartender in Leon Valley. “From what I remember back when my mom and dad were still on the board, Michelle [Anthony-Cryer] made a statement, three or four years ago, that she would be glad to take the orphanage over because she didn’t feel my parents had it in their hearts to take care of the animals. I was just used as a pawn to get my parents out. I think this was planned the entire time by [Anthony-Cryer]. That’s what I feel in

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my heart.”

She chokes back tears.

“I’m sorry, I’m very emotional about this, but nobody cares about the animals. They would rather keep me and Kristina [Brunner] out of there, and all the others who wanted to help out of there, than allow Kristina and I to implement the long list of plans we had for the orphanage.”

The plan included revamped volunteer programs (120 military students from Lackland had already committed to do repairs in early May), the Animal Talk e-newsletter, animal toy and donation drives, and a partnership with the Red Cross.

“[The Cryers] would rather see it fail and close than allow us to get back to that place and try to save it. There’s no need for all this. There’s no need for animals to be placed anywhere. It’s ridiculous. It’s just a personal thing from a married couple against everybody else. And for what? [Anthony-Cryer and the Matthes’] were supposed to be the quorum, but Elise [Matthes] wasn’t voted in as a member by a quorum of three. They tried to [terminate me] by default, and hoped no one would notice. By I know my [by-] laws. It was a retaliation termination, and I have the right to have my job back. I want to put the right people in there, and then walk away.”

Is she admitting that she was not qualified to run WAO in the first place?

“Look ... I would stay long enough to get the place back in order, two to three years, and get some non-profit professionals who know what they’re doing and keep the place alive. Then I’ll move on and pursue another life. This has taken so much from me.”

Posted by gharman on 8/29/2010 7:38:48 PM
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

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
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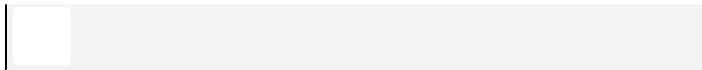
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 Gatorlover 2 days ago

Kris and Nicole were doing a great job and if given enough time they could have, and would have turned the WAO around. It seems that the Cryers have done nothing to help the WAO animals on the contrary they have run this sanctuary into the ground and now its in worse shape then it was with Nicole and Kris.

2 people liked this.  

 Moondancer5 4 days ago



Kris and Nicole put their hearts and souls into bringing the WAO back to life and then the Cryers, in my opinion, intentionally took the place over to destroy it! If they didn't intend to destroy the WAO then they would have been out there helping Nicole and working beside her, NOT, doing everything possible to work against her. What comes around goes around Cryers. I hope your next lives are spent in a very small cage eating moldy dog food, when lucky to get that.

2 people liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)

 Gharman 3 days ago

i haven't heard you attempt to correct any supposed errors in fact, only unload insults.

[Like](#) [Reply](#)

 Rasvestas 3 days ago

P.S. I will be telling my side of the story; but to a REAL newspaper not a gossip rag

[Like](#) [Reply](#)

 Rasvestas 3 days ago

and by unarmed I was saying that mentally . based on his reporting it would be a one sided debate

[Like](#) [Reply](#)

 Rasvestas 3 days ago

wasn't asking for a debate just expressing myself after 11 months of lies being printed by your paper I can't debate with him he is unarmed it's all about drama and no fact ie not checking your sources or your facts

[Like](#) [Reply](#)

 Gharman 3 days ago

enrique's not going to engage in debate with you here, but if would like to tell your side of the story i would suggest you contact him at the email at the top of his story. also, you can also call me anytime at 210.388.0625.

[Like](#) [Reply](#)

 Rasvestas 3 days ago

Lopetegui:

you are a joke as a reporter I read under the Current Goggle listing the they had the best reporters Why don't they send one out to cover the WAO

Ron Asvestas

[Like](#) [Reply](#)

Reactions



SAcurrent 4 days ago

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#satx's troubled wild animal orphanage looking to relocate 55 tigers ... 200 primates. <http://bit.ly/cU2BGX> the end? lopetegui reports

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