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LIVING WITH LIONS

The St. Mary of Egypt Animal Sanctuary

In a unique and engaging interview, veterinarian Joanne Stefanatos and her husband, David Hetzel, recount their experience of raising two African lions, a mountain lion, and a myriad of birds, beasts and reptiles at their Las Vegas, Nevada home. Along with overseeing her own holistic veterinary practice and the St. Mary of Egypt Animal Sanctuary, Dr. Stefanatos annually treats more than a thousand wild animals brought to her by state workers. The couple's Orthodox worldview lends much needed clarity to the discussion of man's relationship to animals.

RTE: When did you first want to become a veterinarian, and how did you train?

DR. JOANNE: I wanted to be a vet as long as I can remember. I was raised in New York where we went to school in the City, and to Central Park Zoo every Saturday to see the animals. Our summers were spent in the Catskill Mountains, and because I loved animals so much, every time we came upon a road kill, I would make my father stop. I'd wrap it up and take it home to dissect it to see what was inside, and then I would bury it. If there was an injured animal on the road, I'd get him to pull over so I could take care of it until we could release it.

After college and graduate school, I entered veterinary school in Columbia, Missouri. Although I had a 4.0 GPA in graduate school, it was still difficult to get in, but with God's help I was accepted. We had a class of sixty, with five women—the other women students were all daughters of veterinarians. I had lived in Las Vegas before medical school, and when I returned in 1972, I started my practice, the Animal Kingdom Veterinary Hospital.

Opposite: Dr. Joanne Stefanatos and David Hetzel with baby Simba the Lioness, Aug. 1989, Las Vegas.

Simba the Lioness

RTE: Can you tell us how Simba the Lioness came to you?

DR. JOANNE: In July of 1989 one of my clients was visiting a Las Vegas casino stage manager. The casino owed him money, so they offered him a lion cub, which he took because his showgirl girlfriend wanted it, thinking, "how cute they are!" So, they brought the six-week-old cub home and one morning when they went shopping they left her on the lawn. They were gone all day, so the cub got hungry and began eating grass, which had just been fertilized with pesticides. Over the next two days she became weaker and weaker from the poison in her system. My client told the couple to take her to a vet, but they replied, "if she makes it, she makes it." She felt so bad that she went back the next day, and when she found the cub nearly comatose she said, "I'm taking her to my vet," and called to ask if I could see her. I said, "Bring her in right away."

My sister Maria had flown in from New York and was at the clinic with me when our client brought the little lioness in. I took her into the treatment room and she tried to vomit, and then just passed out. Her temperature was way below normal, so I put a tube in to pump her stomach, and although I was giving her oxygen, her heart got weaker and weaker. I had my sister help with the oxygen, while I got on the computer to analyze what she'd gotten into. It was Diazinon and the herbicide Atrazine, so I quickly made the homeopathic antidotes, but when I went back to listen to her heart, I heard the last heart-beat. I gave her the antidote and in a few minutes her heart started up again, but it was so weak that I was afraid we still might lose her. Maria, who had just come from the Holy Land, said, "Let's bless her with some holy oil," so she ran to my office icon corner and brought oil from the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. We anointed and prayed over her, "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, come back to life, Simba! You must live, Jesus wants you to live." We talked to her continually, and she came back.

I pumped her stomach out, and although alive, she was completely blind. I took her home that night and Maria and I took turns sleeping with her. We gave her the homeopathic antidotes hourly, and by the next morning she started seeing. There is no doubt that the holy oil, the homeopathic remedies, and the prayers saved her. And the intent.

The second miracle came when we had to make a decision about her future. I care for many exotic animals, but I always tell my clients, "You should

never have gotten an exotic. It doesn't belong in your house or in your yard. You can't do justice to it, and it's too difficult placing these animals later on."

Now, I have to say that my own greatest dream had always been to live with a lion. On those Saturday trips to Central Park Zoo with my brother Michael, we always went to see Simba the lioness and the gorillas, and that was where I fell in love with the original Simba. I would never have wanted to keep a lion in captivity, but now, sure enough, we had to take care of baby Simba until she recuperated. Meanwhile, I was making calls to try to place her.

I first called Tippi Hedren, an actress and well-known animal rights activist, in California at the Shambala Wildlife Preserve near Los Angeles. She was willing but reluctant to take her because they'd lost all of their big cats a few years before from a virus that went through the area. Then I called Prayeri and Dean Harrison, a Christian couple who own "Out of Africa," an animal sanctuary for rescued African animals in Sedona, Arizona. I told them that I had this gorgeous intelligent lioness, but they had so many animals that they didn't have room for her.

We even tried to send her back to Kenya, but the Kenyan authorities will not take lions back into Africa. The next day in surgery, I thought, "I've got to call the Harrisons again." So I called and said, "Listen, God told me that you are the ones that are going to take Simba, so please, I'm asking you now to reconsider your decision." They said, "Well, let us pray on it and we will call you tomorrow." When they called the next day they said, "Bring her down." When we heard this, all of the women at the clinic cried; we didn't want to lose Simba, but we knew that keeping her would mean dedicating our lives to raising her, and she wouldn't be with her own kind. So we took her to Out of Africa when she was about six months old. Once there she wouldn't eat, so every weekend David and I went down to be with her. The day we came down, she would only look in the direction of Las Vegas until we arrived, and then cry her heart out from the moment we got out of our truck, even though she couldn't see us yet.

Unfortunately, the other lions didn't want her with them, so the staff moved Simba in with a female tiger who adopted her. On weekends they would move the tigress so that we could sleep with Simba in her little cave-hut. We would bring the girls from the clinic and we'd all camp out with her, loving her up all weekend long. Finally, David and I had a long-planned vacation in Hawaii, and I told Simba, "We have to go sweetheart, but we'll be back to see you soon and maybe by then you'll be friends with the other

lions. We'll be praying for you constantly." Well, she cried real tears when we left that day.

I still believed that God wanted her down there, so I kept telling her, "You're going to high school now, you've got to pass your exams." The staff and visitors loved her, and people used to come especially to see Simba, but she wouldn't pay attention to anyone except us. So, here we were with this hopeless situation—I didn't see how we could take her ourselves, so in Hawaii I kept praying to God, "Let this pass from my heart and let the best happen for Simba." Then one day on the beach as we were looking at a beautiful sunset, Dave turned to me and said, "Let's bring Simba home."



Tristan the German Shepherd receiving magnetic field therapy for arthritis.

DAVID: I knew that this would take a miracle because raising a lion is an enormous endeavor, especially with two people working full time. The enclosures, the feeding; everything was huge.

DR. JOANNE: It's like raising a child, but you're raising a lion.

DAVID: And they eat a lot more than a child.

DR. JOANNE: When Dave said that, I knew it was God's will, but I didn't know how we would tell the Out of Africa staff who were so attached to her. When we went back I said, "Simba, we love you so much, but God has to show us some kind of sign before we know its right to take you home." A little while later, one of the caretakers came to me and said, "I want to tell you what happened this week. An animal communicator came to the University of Arizona to give a talk, so the owners had her come to look at another big cat with an adjustment problem. They happened to be walking past Simba's enclosure when Prayeri asked the woman, "What do you think about this little cub?" The woman, not knowing any of Simba's history, looked at her

Opposite: Simba the Lioness sunbathing, Las Vegas, 1996.



and said, “She will never be happy here; send her home.” That was the sign we’d been waiting for.

So, that afternoon when it was feeding time, we left Simba and the tigress to feed. Suddenly there was a huge commotion, dust was flying, and I heard Simba screaming. We were standing right on the other side of the enclosure, but I couldn’t see for the dust. I opened the gate and was ready to go in and get Simba, when she came running out and jumped into our arms. We closed the gate fast. This tigress had always been very protective of Simba, but at this moment, for the first time, she was angry because Simba went for the food at the same time she did. This was the third sign.

So we went to the Harrisons and told them the story: “Because of this, we think we should take Simba home, but we can’t thank you enough for what you’ve done.” When we returned the following Friday, the staff told us that Simba had never been as happy as she was that week. Although she couldn’t see us, the moment we backed the truck up to the gate, she screamed, and as soon as the gate opened she leaped into the back of the truck and wouldn’t get out for anything—though she did come to the edge to greet everyone who had cared for her. Simba and I sat in the back of the truck, arm in arm, and Dave drove us all the way home.

When we got home and opened up the back of the truck, Simba cautiously came to the edge to look around. When she saw where she was, she urinated on our legs to mark us as hers forever.

DAVID: Once they do that, you belong to them for the rest of their life. We were her pride. Also, I had a little German Shepherd in college named Mon Ami who was still with us when Simba first arrived; she literally raised Simba as a cub. Mon Ami was an old lady by this time, and when Simba would try to jump her, she would snap, but to her dismay, Simba just kept growing. When we brought Simba back from Out of Africa, Mon Ami, looked at her and you could see her thinking, “Oh no, she’s back and even bigger than when she left!”

DR. JOANNE: Simba loved being with us, but she was eight or nine months old and too big to be in the house; so I would camp out with her in the backyard. I had two cots in her area with sleeping bags on them. She would lay on hers and I would lay on mine, and I woke up one night to feel my head being pulled—she had started swallowing my hair, but it was still attached to my head! (*Laughter*)

Kenya the Dog

DR. JOANNE: Now we knew that we wanted a companion for Simba, but because she couldn't handle another cat, it had to be a dog. She always liked the dogs from the clinic, and she liked being friends with dogs, so we prayed that God would send us the right dog. Six months after we got Simba, a couple came in with a big mixed Lab-German Shepherd they had found. No one had claimed her and they couldn't keep her themselves, so I thought, "Wow, she's the same height as Simba." That night I said to her, "You're a black Nubian princess, and I'm going to call you Kenya. Now look, would you be happy living with a lioness for the rest of your life? Because Simba needs a sister and you need a home, but if you don't like her and can't handle living with her, I'll bring you back to the clinic and find you a good home."

At that point we had a tall enclosure around our property, and as we opened the gate, I could see David walking down the driveway with Simba to meet me. When he opened the truck door, Kenya came flying out and she and Simba began sniffing and chasing each other's tail. We didn't see them again until the next morning when we found them in the garage sleeping on top of each other. It was meant to be.

DAVID: Kenya was truly a princess and they kept each other warm at night. After a few weeks I wanted to bond with Kenya because she was spending all of her time with Simba who was then eight months old, and I thought that she needed more human contact. So I took Kenya to an obedience class, but as soon as I took her out of Simba's enclosure, Simba would just cry: "Whooo, whooo," until I brought her back. During this class I taught her how to do all this great stuff, and I thought, "I want to try this with Simba, too." Joanne said, "Are you crazy? She's the king of the beasts," but I still wanted to try, so I put the choker collar on Simba and said, "Come, come... follow me," but she wouldn't budge. I didn't pull hard because I knew she had a big-time memory and I didn't want her to remember me hurting her, so I said, "Ok, Simba, if you don't want to do it, don't do it." So I dropped the leash, which had a leather handle on it, turned around and walked away. I heard something, and turned to look. There was Simba following along right behind me, carrying the leather leash handle in her mouth.

DR. JOANNE: Simba and Kenya's favorite game was "Chase the Tail Around the Hut," so you'd see Simba chasing Kenya, and then all of a sudden they'd



be running in the other direction with Kenya chasing Simba. Then they'd grab each other's tail and continue to run. After Kenya died, we tried to introduce another black lab, but that poor dog took one look at Simba and tried to dig its way out. It didn't want anything to do with her.

RTE: What did you feed Simba, and where did she live?

DR. JOANNE: We bought human grade food—cases of whole chickens, whole turkeys, sides of beef. During deer season, the local hunters always gave us the legs and heads for Simba. We had a freezer full.

DAVID: We built an enclosure with a sleeping hut, and in their later years, when the lions became arthritic, we planted grass in their enclosures to make walking easier. In Simba and Kenya's enclosure there was also a two-level platform that we called "Simba's throne." Simba loved her throne, and often when Joanne went off to work, Simba would be lying on her back catching the early morning sun. When Joanne came to say goodbye, Simba would raise her back leg and wave. I'd arrive home in the evening before Joanne, and I knew when to get the meal started because about twenty minutes before she arrived, Simba would move to the corner of the enclosure closest to the driveway and just sit there, watching and waiting. She wouldn't move.

DR. JOANNE: I had to greet her first because she was the queen. Also, both of our lions had icons in their cave-houses. When she slept in her house, Simba would look up at the icons of St. Mary of Egypt, or St. Gerasimos of the Jordan, or St. Gerasimos of Cephalonia. I'd say, "Simba, pray to these holy saints," and she'd look up at them so intently that I felt she understood and was praying in her own way." Sometimes in the morning, I'd say, "Simba, go venerate St. Gerasimos," and she'd stand up on her hind legs and touch the icon with her paw and sniff it."

DAVID: We play a lot of Byzantine music, so they were raised with an atmosphere of prayer. Sabba the male lion was just as aware.

Sabba, the Male Lion

RTE: How did Sabba come to you?

Opposite: David Hetzel and Sabba the African Lion, 2006, Las Vegas.

DAVID: In 1991, when I began commuting weekly to chiropractic school in Los Angeles, I said, “Joanne, how about getting another lion to keep Simba happy?” As we had with Simba, we prayed, “God, whatever Your will is.” Within a matter of several weeks, Prayeri and Dean down in Arizona called us and said, “Would you be interested in a little male cub?”

DR. JOANNE: They said, “He was confiscated, has distemper, and can’t walk. There is a black skin fungus all over his body. We’ve got so many cats now that we don’t have the facilities to take him.” The distemper meant that if he lived, he would probably have neurological problems for the rest of his life, and you can’t have a 500-2000 lb. lion falling over—he’d break a leg. There isn’t yet a drug to cure distemper, and he was still only three or four months old. Our only hope was to try our natural therapies on him, so we put him into a veterinary clinic in Arizona until we got permission from Fish and Wildlife to keep him. When my brother and I picked him up from the airport and brought him home, we took him out of the crate, but he couldn’t take two steps without tipping over from the distemper. I treated him with magnetic field therapy, electric acupuncture, homeopathy, medication, and shampoo baths. He did great, and the folks from the Arizona clinic all came up to see him. Simba, unfortunately, was jealous of him, so we built a second enclosure.

DAVID: When I came home every weekend from chiropractic school, I’d come into the clinic and say, “Where’s that little boy?” and this lion cub would come running around the corner as fast as he could, slipping and sliding, almost doing somersaults, and then jump right into my arms, kissing me and grabbing my beard.” It was love at first sight for both of us.

DR. JOANNE: As you may know, male lions only want to be around other male lions, so he was totally attached to Dave, but when Dave left on Sunday nights for chiropractic school, Sabba became my best friend in the world. He’d come to me, and I was his again. He’d let me brush his mane and put my finger in his ears and kiss him, but the moment David came home, there was no one but David. He was a guy again.

I do believe that the saints watched out for them, and this story happened a few years later when Sabba had just grown his mane, which male lions do at three years old. We cleaned their areas out every Sunday afternoon after church so that we could spend time with them, and we always wore gloves that were half-leather and half-fabric. I don’t know what happened that day,

but we forgot a glove in Sabba's area, and realized the next day that he had eaten it. We prayed that he would pass it, but there was no way, so we oiled him down with mineral oil; David just drenched him. A week went by and still nothing. Then he stopped eating, and I thought, "We can't let this go on, we're going to have to do surgery to get this glove out." As I was thinking this, St. Mary of Egypt came to my thoughts and I heard, "Pray for him, pray for him." So we prayed to her to help us. Her feast-day was coming up, so we put everything in God's hands. Sabba still wasn't eating, he was getting thinner and it looked like surgery was inevitable, until April 1, the morning of St. Mary's feast-day, when he passed the glove. There was no leather left, just the remnants of the canvas, and I am sure it was the saint blessing us.

Seraphim Rose, the Mountain Lion

DR. JOANNE: Although after Sabba, David had said, "No more cats," one Friday afternoon about six months later, a wealthy woman called and said, "I rescued this mountain lion cub from a man in a wheelchair who was abusing him. I work for this man part-time, so I just took the cat. I love him and have him at my house now, in the yard behind a high fence that borders the golf course. He's on a 40-foot chain, but the golfers hit balls over the wall, and now that he's six months old, he's begun leaping into the air to catch the balls. The neighbors have realized that I have a mountain lion and they're afraid he will get loose and eat their dogs, so Animal Control called this morning and said that if I don't get rid of him by Monday noon they are going to come and shoot him. He's a beautiful cat and I don't want anything to happen to him. I said, "No, no, no, don't let them shoot him, no matter what. I'll make some calls this weekend and I'll call you Monday morning once I find where we can place him."

I called all weekend, and on Monday morning while I was waiting for the last callback, I got busy with two back-to-back emergencies. When noon came around, I had a whole lobby full of dogs and their owners, when all of a sudden I heard a tremendous barking and shrieking. It was this woman who had walked into the clinic with the mountain lion in a diamond-studded collar attached to the forty-foot chain that she'd wrapped around her arm. One of my assistants shouted, "Doctor, Doctor!" I opened the door into the hallway and all of a sudden this little mountain lion comes charging down the hall and leaps into my arms. I looked at him and said, "I'm madly in love

with you. Come stay with me.” The woman said, “You said not to let them shoot him, so I brought him here.” I said, “Yes, I’ll find him a good home.” She was so appreciative, and then she said, “Here’s his leash, but sorry, I have to keep the collar or my husband will be upset—its real!” (*laughter*)

So, now I’m praying and praying, and that night I brought the cub home. I knew he couldn’t be with Simba because Simba would eat him up, but Sabba was a gentle soul and they were both boys, so I thought, “If God allows!” So, I put the little mountain lion on the other side of the fence from Sabba. I said, “Sabba honey, I brought your brother home.” The mountain lion and Sabba started sniffing noses, so I opened the gate and let him in. They liked each other at first sight and slept together all night, one on top of the other. This was Monday night and I knew I only had until Friday to find a home for



David Hetzel and Sabba the African Lion, 2001.

the mountain lion because David was coming home for the weekend and I’d promised no more cats.

I prayed so hard, but still couldn’t find a place. I felt I needed a strategic plan to break the news gently, so that Dave wouldn’t see the mountain lion first thing after his long drive, so on Friday I unscrewed all of the light bulbs in the lions’ area. In the evening when

he got home he went out to the backyard: “Where’s my boy, where’s Sabba?” Then I heard him say, “Sabba, why are all the lights out?” Then he heard this “Bbbrrruuuupppp”—the sound mountain lions make. He said, “What’s that sound?” The cub made it again, and David said, “You’re up to something!” and went to get a flashlight. “There’s a mountain lion in here! We agreed, no more lions!” I said, “OK, if you think I should take him back to the clinic, I’ll place him from there. I’ll take him back tomorrow.” I knew he would fall in love with him. Dave looked him over and petted him, and came back saying, “I’m not getting attached to him.” The next morning he was out there first thing, and at noon, I said, “You’ve been so great, thanks a million. I’ll take

Opposite: Seraphim Rose, the Mountain Lion.



him back now.” I got the carrier to put the mountain lion in and Dave said, “Well, don’t rush.” I said, “I won’t, but I promised I would move him today, so let’s get it over with.”

DAVID: (*laughing*) I looked at Joanne and said, “We’ll keep him, we’ll keep him. What’s one more?”

DR. JOANNE: Simba, our lioness, didn’t like Seraphim Rose, the mountain lion, because lions often don’t like animals that are smaller than themselves unless you raise them together. As we’d gotten the mountain lion as a cub, I wanted to see if it would work to put him with Simba for company, but Simba chased him right down and played much too rough. So, Seraphim Rose ended up living in the second enclosure with Sabba, the male lion, who really loved him.

One day, when I was cleaning the enclosures, Seraphim Rose’s tail went under the fence. Simba ran up and grabbed it and the mountain lion started screaming bloody murder. There was no one around to help and I couldn’t get to him, so I yelled to Sabba, who was resting in the next enclosure: “Sabba, help me!! Help me!!” He stood up and roared for the first time in his life! Simba instantly dropped the tail, put her ears down, and retreated to the back of her area.

DAVID: Sabba had a roar like thunder. And because the mountain lion had some minor wounds and was recuperating in Sabba’s hut, Sabba stood out all night in the rain and wind standing guard over him to make sure that nothing else happened.

The Lions and People

RTE: How did the lions interact with other people?

DR. JOANNE: When Simba was young and roamed around the grounds, you could just glance at her, and in a blink she would think it was play time and jump you. We had old couches all over the porch and patio, so if she downed you, you could fall on a couch. When both lions were young, my brother Michael would come every week to play and wrestle with them dressed in layers of sweatshirts and gloves. They loved him too.

For twenty-five years I had a very proper English receptionist, and when Simba was a cub she would often lie on her couch in my office, just wait-

ing for Margaret to come back with a message. Now Margaret was afraid of Simba, so if she needed to speak to me, she would walk quietly to the surgery, hoping that Simba was asleep. Often, she'd get half-way down the hall and I'd hear a stifled exclamation of surprise. Simba had downed her. Poor Margaret would be on the ground, saying, "Doctor, Doctor, she did it again! How are you going to stop her? I can't work like this!"

One thing that people often don't know is that you can't have children around wild animals because their smell drives the animals crazy to get at them. We only let personal friends with a few children come to see the lions, and we would protect them the whole time.

DAVID: In the early days when the lions were young I'd also wrestle with them, and we'd try to pin each other down. I'd wear heavy sweatshirts, but I've still got scars from their razor-sharp baby teeth—they didn't bite, but as they grew, every move became stronger and heavier. Finally, there came a point where Simba was on top of me and I could just barely get her off. I said, "I think this is it, I'd better not do this anymore." When they got bigger, though, both of them would let me get on their back and ride them like a horse. That was a thrill!

They were so strong that if I walked behind Sabba and he flicked his tail, it was like getting hit with a baseball bat. I couldn't put my hands around the spot where his tail went into his body, because it was all muscle. The power of that tail! If I was in the enclosure combing his mane or doing something else and he put his paw on top of my hand, I couldn't move it. Even when he was a baby, his paw was already the size of my head; it was massive.

DR. JOANNE: I'd put my finger in Simba's mouth to feel if a new molar was coming, and when I felt it, I'd say, "Simba, Simba, be gentle, that's my finger." She always was gentle, she never bit down. They are so intelligent.

DAVID: As they grew larger we made a pact that we would never go into their areas or huts without both of us being around. Simba was about eight months old at this point and one evening the light in her hut was out. I wanted to go change it, and Simba was way on the other side of the compound so I thought, "I'll just sneak in there quick, unscrew the bulb, and put the new one in." So, I went in, but in the blink of an eye she was in that hut wanting to play, and had me pinned to the ground with my whole head in her mouth. She accidentally split my ear open and I knew I was in trouble.



I couldn't get back out because there were two swinging doors and the one behind me that I could reach was locked, so I pushed against the door with my back until the screws came loose. The door flew open and I fell out. There was a log there and I picked it up swinging, saying, "Simba, No!, No!"—but she was in play mode, a teenager testing her strength. Usually I would win, but now she had realized that she was the stronger one.

DR. JOANNE: When I pulled in the driveway, Dave came walking toward me as dazed as he could be, and said, "Simba, got me. I think I'm bleeding." I said, "No, no, you're not bleeding, where did she get you?" He had blood all over, but couldn't see it because he was in shock. I wanted him to stay calm so I said, "Oh, no, you're really not bleeding, just sit here and I'll get a towel for you." He said, "I think she tore my ear off," and I said, "No, no, she didn't do any of that. She was just kissing you." (*laughter*) I couldn't really see if his ear was still there until I'd washed all the blood off, so I said, "Let me wash it off—just look the other way." I had to give him Rescue Remedy to get him out of shock. As it turned out, his ear was there and she'd just given him a little nick, but it bled a lot. We were really careful after that.

DAVID: Once they were full grown, the lions were massive, and one time a workman at the house asked to see her, so I stepped into the enclosure to see if I could spot her. Although Simba was a fully grown lion, she could be almost invisible when she wanted to be. Instead of where I thought she'd be, she was in the bush behind me, and when she jumped out and put her paws on my shoulders, the poor workman freaked out. He thought I was being eaten.

DR. JOANNE: Another time there were workers on the roof when Sabba stood up and roared. They nearly fell off.

DAVID: But Sabba was actually very gentle. Both lions would get excited and happy with rain and thunder: that's the kind of weather when lions love to go hunting. Once I went into the enclosure and Sabba, who was all excited with a storm coming, wanted to jump me. As I backed out, I slipped and fell, and found myself laying on the ground looking up at him. To a wild animal, that is when you instinctively become prey, but Sabba just stood there looking down at me until Joanne came out and shooed him away.

Opposite: Dr. Joanne Stefanatos and six-month-old Simba the Lioness, Christmas, 1989, Las Vegas.

DR. JOANNE: One day when Dave was away at school, I was doing shenanigans I shouldn't have done, but I decided I wanted to sleep with Seraphim Rose, the mountain lion who was now a big cub. We have a king-size bed, so I called him over to the window and told him to jump in, but he couldn't jump that high, so I said, "Sabba, come and help us. You stand under the window, so that Seraphim Rose can jump in." Sabba knew what I was saying, and he came right over to the window. The cub jumped on his back and in through the window, and then curled up on the bed. At that moment David called, so I went out to talk to him, forgetting that he had a goose down pillow, and to Seraphim Rose that smell meant a goose in the bed! I heard a commotion and went running back in to find him tearing the pillow to shreds. There were feathers everywhere, a terrible mess. Then our lion king Sabba decided he wanted to join the fun and tried to leap through the window too, but he was so big that when he hit the window, he broke the glass. As I came back in the room to deal with them, I stepped on a vinegaroon (similar to a scorpion, but larger)—which promptly and sensibly stung me!

DAVID: I knew something was going on when Joanne dropped the phone, and all of a sudden I heard the window shatter and glass breaking. I'm in California thinking, "What's going on with Joanne?" I was as worried as can be. Then Joanne came back and calmly says, "Dave, I can't talk now. Everything's ok, but I have to hang up!"

DR. JOANNE: The glass and feathers were everywhere, and I had to pick up Seraphim Rose and throw him back out the window, doctor my foot, and clean everything up.

DAVID: (laughing) After that, we put bullet-proof glass on that side of the house.

DR. JOANNE: And we put a wrought-iron grating over the window so that we could have it open and put our arms and faces through to hug the lions.

Another thing about Sabba—he loved David so much. David would grab his mane, pull it up to his face, and they would smother each other with kisses. I'd go up and say, "Sabba, just a little kiss, one little kiss?" and he'd turn his face away. (*Laughter*) He'd let me comb his mane and clean his ears, but no injections, ever. I always had to do the hard part. He tolerated me with love, but David was his.

Seraphima the Dove; Close Encounter with a Mountain Lion

DR. JOANNE: We also had a very special white dove named Seraphima who lived in the house with us. She was rehabilitated at our Animal Kingdom Veterinary Hospital, and then I brought her home to roost in the trees so she could get back into flying, but she never wanted to leave.

DAVID: She wouldn't fly, she'd walk.

DR. JOANNE: Yes, she would walk, but always while turning her head to watch us: "Is he seeing me, is she seeing me? She loved David, and one morning as I was getting breakfast, I heard, "Joanne, get this bird off me!" She had crept into our room while David was still asleep, nestled into his beard, and was cooing away, "Hu kukuku, kuku."

Another day, while David was at school, I came home and found her fluttering around excitedly. I have a picture of David high up on a hutch, and she was standing in front of it swaying back and forth, "hu kukukuku hukukuku," all puffed up. I said, "Seraphima, what are you doing?" So I went closer to look and she had laid an egg right in front of David's picture. (*laughter*)

DAVID: When we came home at night she'd fly down and land on my head or my shoulder. One day there was a huge windstorm while we were at work, and she was simply blown away. We came home and there was no Seraphima.

DR. JOANNE: I prayed and prayed every day for her. I'd look out the window at her favorite branch in the fig tree and say, "Oh, please God, bring her back, we'll take care of her. I'll bring her in the house."

DAVID: Then one day I looked out the window and saw something grey in the tree. I said, "Joanne, I think Seraphima's back."

DR. JOANNE: We were out there like lightning, calling her name.

DAVID: She'd found her way back, but her feathers were all straggly and she was so weak and emaciated that I had to climb high up into the tree to get her.

DR. JOANNE: We kept her in the house with us every night after that, and put her out during the beautiful days. She had a wonderful life.

Late one night I remember we had guests, and somehow when the door opened Seraphima flew straight out in the dark into the lion's area. In an instant, Seraphim Rose, our mountain lion, grabbed her in his mouth. I shouted at him, "Drop her, drop her, don't touch her!" Dave came out, and we took her out of the lion's mouth and into the house. We treated her little wounds and gave her Rescue Remedy, because although the mountain lion didn't hurt her, she was in shock. David held her and cooed to her. She tried to coo back but she couldn't, she was too injured, so we just sat around her and prayed. She was fine after a few days.

RTE: It's amazing that the mountain lion was able to keep from eating such a tasty morsel that had practically flown into his mouth!



Four-month-old Simba the Lioness with Dr. Joanne and David, 1989.

DAVID: And to think that Seraphim Rose dropped her on Joanne's command! We had two angels, Seraphima the dove, and the Lion King Sabba. He never once hurt me, and he would cry when I went to work and cry when I came back home. He was just totally love.

DR. JOANNE: We also take care of other small birds that people bring in, and now I bring them home to roost here in the summertime. At one point we had two little mockingbirds who were just ready to be released. The lions' enclosures are in the back of the house, so when I brought them home, I put the birds in Seraphima's front-yard tree so that they could try to fly from branch to branch without being distracted by the lions. I went out to check a little later and they weren't there. I thought, "My gosh, what happened?" So I went around the house and there I see the two birds perched on top of Simba the lioness. She's laying on her back with her paws out sunning herself—one of the birds is on her head and the other is on her leg. She's just looking at them. I said, "Simba, don't hurt the birds,"

Opposite: Dr. Joanne Stefanatos and Seraphima the Dove at the Animal Kingdom Veterinary Hospital, 1998, Las Vegas.



but she didn't pay any attention, although she did let me come in and take them off of her.

Simba and the Vicious Dog

DR. JOANNE: As I said, Simba liked the dogs at the clinic, but one day a Las Vegas businessman came in with his German dog handler, a retired cop from Chicago who had just picked up his boss's new German-trained Rottweiler. This was one of the most vicious dogs I'd ever seen, and the owner himself kept his distance while his trainer held the dog.

The second I walked into the room, the dog was ready to tear into me. The handler pulled back on him shouting, "Nein! Nein!" and when I asked if they had a muzzle, they said "No," so I left the door open in case I had to make a quick exit. I said, "I'm just going to see if I can do anything with this dog today." I turned around with a thermometer and shook it, holding it up in the air so the dog could see it.

The dog went ballistic! He turned on the owner, pinned him to the wall, and if the handler wasn't holding him, he would have torn his neck out. At that point I was out of the room. The dog finally calmed down, and I said to them, "I can't do anything unless I sedate him." They said, "Absolutely." So they put him in the run and I told them that after my morning appointments I would treat him. In the meantime, no one could walk by without him snapping and hitting the run like he was going to kill them. Suddenly I heard a noise as if he was tearing the place apart. I ran back because I knew that Simba had been sleeping in the office and I wanted to be sure that she didn't go into the area, because she liked to look at the dogs.

As soon as I looked through the door, I saw Simba standing next to his run, with the dog clawing at the fence with saliva dripping from his mouth, trying to tear down the run to get her. At that very moment, however, he suddenly got a whiff of her, became very quiet, and crept backwards to the end of the run, shaking violently. He'd never seen a lion before in his life, and she was only six weeks old, but he instinctively knew what she was. I sedated the dog with a dart gun and then treated him. The next time he was brought in, I thought, "You know what?" I'm going to hug and kiss Simba a lot before I go in to treat this crazy dog." When I opened the door, the dog was looking at me with an evil eye, so I waved my hands in the air and said, "Well, how are you today? Hello!" At that point he became completely docile and let me do anything I needed to him, because he thought I was a lion.

The Horse with Colic

A similar thing happened one Sunday morning. We were dressed and ready to go to church when I got a call from a close friend, telling me that her horse had colic and she couldn't reach their vet. I said, "Ok, I'll come down before church." I'd said goodbye to the lions, so I reeked of lion and when I walked into the barn the horse started screaming and hitting the wall with his foot. As I walked up with the owner, the horse peered around at me, his eyes rolled back into his head. I thought, "Oh, I bet he smells Simba on me." So I said, "Pinto, I'm not a lion, I'm your vet. I'm going to help you." I washed my hands and he let me get a little closer, and then I put my hand on top of the owner's to pet the horse. He was looking cross-eyed at my hand as I petted him. I said, "You're in so much pain. Please let me help you." He stomped twice more with his hoof and then let me treat him.

RTE: These animals weren't raised in Africa and have never seen a lion. How do they have this kind of reaction?

DR. JOANNE: It's because they have a species intelligence. For example, one thing I didn't know about lions, even those born and raised in captivity, is that they are frightened of the color red. One day when Simba was about three months old, my cousin came to visit from New York. She had the most beautiful ruby red shoes on, and she immediately started down the hall calling for Simba. Simba was so happy to hear her, but the moment she saw Parasceve's red shoes, she backed up, petrified. I'd never seen her afraid of anything, and I thought, "What could it be?" I guessed it must be her shoes, so Parasceve took her shoes off and put them in the closet. Simba immediately came to be played with, but the second my cousin took them out again, Simba ran away. It turns out that the Masai tribes hunt lions, and they only wear red. In their puberty rights, by which a boy is accepted into the tribe as a man, he has to kill a lion, and it is in the lions' DNA to fear red. But by the time that year was up, Simba had learned to love red. I like to wear red and I got her red bedding to lay in; now she likes red. This ancestral fear works the other way too. We once had an Orthodox African evangelist visit us who, like most natives, is petrified of lions. When Sabba somehow tripped a cord and shut off the lights, the poor man ended up sitting in the car for rest of the evening.

The Lions' Passing

RTE: How long did you have the lions?

DAVID: Longer than their natural life span, but it was still very hard when they passed.

DR. JOANNE: Between predators and hard living, lions only live eight to twelve years in the wild, so we were blessed to have them longer. Kenya our black Lab-Shepherd was the first to go at thirteen, and then Seraphim Rose, the mountain lion, died at fourteen from cancer when we were in Africa. Sabba died at sixteen in 2007 and Simba in 2008 at eighteen years old. They developed cancer one after another because the city built a microwave tower close to our house. I'd brought a huge stack of research on this to the local commission, but they wouldn't do anything.

A lighter side of the story is that when we knew Sabba was dying we called our priest to come and bless him. He agreed, and when he arrived, David brought him to the enclosure. Stopping outside of the fence, he pulled out his cross and said, "I'll bless him from here." I said, "No, no, please come in. He's got to see you." So he came close and made the sign of the Cross over Sabba, blessing him. As he gave the blessing Sabba was laying in my lap looking up at him, just eyeing him intently as if he saw something, and then he put his head down, very peacefully.

I didn't want to go to work that week, but there was no one to cover for me, so on Tuesday morning, St. Michael's Day, I stopped at an Orthodox church to say a prayer, venerate the icon, and beg God and St. Michael, "Please help Sabba, I don't want him to suffer. Please take him to heaven." I had such a heavy heart all day, until about four in the afternoon when the heaviness suddenly lifted and I felt incredibly happy. I thought, "Why am I so happy? What has happened to Sabba?" He had passed at that moment and I felt it. He wasn't hurting any more.

David arrived home first and called to tell me, and I knew then that Sabba had come to me at work. When David got home, he went into the enclosure and just sat there with Sabba. The sky was completely clear, but suddenly a single cloud formed and began to drizzle a very gentle rain, like drops of tears. I arrived soon after; we were crying our hearts out. All of a sudden, out of the cloud came a thunderclap like a roar—one large long roll of thunder! I leaned over him saying, "Oh King, we love you so much, but we know that

God gave you to us and now you are in heaven with him.” As soon as I said that, I saw something that confirmed my belief.

With Simba the crisis came in the middle of the night and she was gone by ten o'clock in the morning, so we didn't have time to call Father to come and bless her. We'd sat outside with her all night, and after she passed, I came down with the worst flu you can imagine, a terribly high fever. I couldn't move. Suddenly out of the blue, our very down-to-earth no-nonsense priest called: “Simba came to me last night in my dream and told me I have to come and see you because you are sick!” I said, “Simba came to you, Father? She's in heaven now.” He said, “Don't tell me that!” (*laughter*) He was silent for a moment and then asked, “Are you sick?” I said, “Yes, I'm very sick.” “Then, I'm coming right over, or I won't be able to sleep tonight!” (*more laughter*) You see, Simba came to him because she was worried about me.

DAVID: The first time I made a pilgrimage to Mount Athos, Joanne said, “Find an elder and ask if there are animals in heaven.” She knows there are, but she wanted to hear it. After some days, I was blessed to find a wonderful elder in the Karelian desert of Mount Athos, and so I asked him the question. He looked directly at me and said, “Of course, there are animals in heaven. There are animals here on earth and there are animals in heaven.” ✦