

Illinois Community Raising Money To Help Parrots

Concerned citizens work together to help two free-flying macaws

By Angela Pham

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Courtesy of Dr. Lorin Lindner
At Serenity Park, a bird sanctuary in Los Angeles, Calif., birds have a permanent home.

When Del Nejmanowski drove his truck down the rural roads of Carlinville, Illinois, he wasn't alone.

During his scenic drives, two brilliant blue-and-gold macaws would fly majestically above his pickup, devotedly following their owner and providing a splendid show for the neighbors who witnessed the drive.

They were free-flying birds, escaping cold Illinois winters in an exterior shelter that Nejmanowski built for them and the other six birds he used to keep. His beloved flock was down to two when he died August 27, 2008, and today they still fly free around the neighborhood where Nejmanowski's house and lean-to shelter once stood. They rarely fly far from their old home where their caretaker used to dwell.

But the plummeting temperatures and icy conditions of winter are threatening the birds, which are best suited to tropical climates. Concern among Nejmanowski's family members and neighbors is growing. They all know that if the notorious animal-lover Nejmanowski were still here, he would want his parrots to be safe, warm and loved, just as he ensured they were when they were in his care.

One of his daughters, Gina Purdue, knows just the place to provide the parrots a safe haven.

At the Serenity Park bird sanctuary in west Los Angeles, California, parrots fly free throughout the aviary in flocks; they forage for food and though they cannot breed, the birds can socialize. The climate in the area is consistently warm and moderate, and the parrots are assured constant care.

The workers at this facility are American war veterans, many of which who are homeless and suffering from war-induced trauma like post-traumatic stress disorder. Through working with The Association for Parrot CARE (Conservation, Adoption, Rescue and Education), they are eased back into the job market, said Dr. Lorin Lindner, PhD, MPH, founder and resident of the non-profit organization.

Such a sanctuary would surely stir Nejmanowski if he could see it today. A war veteran himself, Nejmanowski was always an animal lover, owning animals like a monkey and a bear in his past. His birds made up a big portion of his animal kingdom, and the two that now remain in Carlinville are at risk if they are not found and captured soon.

Dr. Lindner said that while the sanctuary has limited space for birds due to the frequent number of surrenders, it would welcome the two parrots from Illinois. She knows the dangers of allowing the birds to remain outdoors with no care in a dangerously cold climate.

"[The parrots] were accustomed to human care, and they may not get used to getting food on their own," she said. "They may not be able to get the food supply necessary for tropical species like that in the winter. Even if they can tolerate the cold, their beaks are not suited to go through ice."

Lindner also warned of the chance that the macaws might displace the native species of Illinois.

While Nejmanowski's parrots still fly free, lessons can be learned. If a bird owner dies, Lindner said, a plan must be in place to ensure that the birds aren't left in the cold like Nejmanowski's were.

"No matter how old you are, even if you're a younger person, you should have a will for your animals," Lindner said. "And make certain to make provisions for them, especially for the parrots if they're not with you."

Right now, the Nejmanowski family and neighbors in the Carlinville community are working to raise \$11,000 to help capture the two macaws, transport them to California and keep them healthy and happy in the Serenity Park sanctuary for many years to come. It's a lot of money, but with long life expectancies for such parrots, it's a necessity. This is why Lindner said that supporting bird sanctuaries is important for bird owners to do now.

"Provide some minimal funding while you're alive," she said. "If you don't support that sanctuary now, it might not be in existence later, and when you die, there may not be an aviary structure constructed there for your bird."

With the current poor economy contributing to even more bird owners surrendering their parrots, Lindner said donations are critical to keep the sanctuary running.

For more information, contact The Association for Parrot CARE at 866-parrotcare (727-7682) or visit its website.