

Interview With Colleen Zenk Pinter

As *The World Turns* star & cancer survivor, Colleen Zenk Pinter, shares what birds mean to her

By Jessica Pineda

While Colleen Zenk Pinter has yet to have birds on the set of "As The World Turns," shee has had some on-set animal encounters. Former "cast members" have included a little puppy, a goat, and a rabbit named Snickers. For the show's 50th Anniversary, Zenk Pinter's character had a run in with a black bear.

She might play villainess Barbara Ryan in the soap opera "As The World Turns," but Colleen Zenk Pinter is a true bird lover. Along with Shetland sheepdogs, a Somali cat, an African pygmy hedgehog, Zenk Pinter has a large aviary with Lady Gouldian finches, orange cheeks, cordon blues, owl finches, shaft tails and diamond doves. She also has Sydney, a rose-breasted cockatoo.

Zenk Pinter is a cancer survivor, having been diagnosed with oral cancer in 2007. After her treatments, surgeries and brachytherapy radiation, she partnered with The Oral Cancer Foundation and became an advocate, doing interviews on TV and producing PSAs on the importance of early detection. Even her character, Ryan, had oral cancer, helping spread information on the disease.

Zenk Pinter credits her birds with helping her get through those trying times, but her love for them began many years earlier. Her nephew, who stayed with the Zenk Pinters every summer, had a cockatiel named Jake. The Zenk Pinters also had Benny, a black-capped conure, which passed away two years ago. These two birds helped pave the way for a whole aviary of finches and canaries.

Zenk Pinter's aviary started with Leonardo Da Vinci, a red-factor canary that needed a friend. Zenk Pinter said she thought, "This might be really fun; having different finches living all together."

She got a large aviary flight cage and introduced more finches and canaries pair by pair. "My kids were ready to kill me," Zenk Pinter said, when she described how her family reacted toward her newfound love of birds. "They used to say 'Mom, you can't even play with them!'"

(It turns out the love for birds rubbed off on some of her children. Her daughter owns a bird, as well.)

It's easy to tell why birds hold such a special place in Zenk Pinter's heart. "The day after my initial surgery [for my cancer], three little chicks were born," Zenk Pinter shared. "The birds helped get me up every morning to cook their food. They gave me purpose."

Although Zenk Pinter has a busy schedule with the filming of "As The World Turns," she has a lot of help from her husband and six children. "The birds are my job," Zenk Pinter said. "But when I am at work, my husband chips in to help."

Zenk Pinter loves to learn about birds and is constantly reading everything she can get her hands on. "Everything I know about birds is from books," said Zenk Pinter. "I research like mad, and I read books like "Birds For Dummies," "The Proper Care of Cockatoos" by Helmut Pinter, I've been on MyToos.com, and I talk to other bird people around me."

When it comes to learning about birds, Zenk Pinter said, "I'm like a sponge. I just want to learn and learn."

Her search for Sydney, her rose-breasted cockatoo, led her to Parrots & Company, a bird store in Connecticut. "All the

babies were out in a gigantic environment,” said Zenk Pinter, “Twenty to 30 babies that you could play with were on T-stands.” Zenk Pinter was drawn to the rose-breasted cockatoos and spent a while playing with one. Then she brought her husband along, and they picked out Sydney. Upon bringing him home, Sydney was “snuggling and dancing and preening my bangs.”