

# Jungle Joe and Outback Owen bring a zoo to school

## Exotic animals fascinate boys and girls in Ottsville

Gasps of delight greeted each exotic creature as it emerged from its carrying case – from brightly colored Ziggy, a 30-year-old macaw, to sweet-looking Sydney, a 6-month-old red kangaroo, and a variety of cute cuddlies and creepy crawlies in between.

The pre-k through 8th grade students at St. John the Baptist School in Ottsville hung on every word of the animals' trainer, Jungle Joe, Pet Detective, aka Joe Fortunato, as he shared information about more than a dozen exotic mammals, birds, invertebrates, reptiles and amphibians.

Handling exotic wildlife is all part of a day's work for Fortunato who has turned his lifelong fascination with animals into a new business.

"I've had Ziggy since high school, but the first animal I got was a boa constrictor when I was in the sixth grade," Joe said in answer to a student's question. "All the animals are my favorites, because I bottle feed them as babies, and we bond."

Throughout Fortunato's law enforcement career, he continued to work with exotics as a hobby. After his retirement in 2006, he incorporated Animal Junction, "the teaching zoo that visits you" and now occupies a large facility in Warwick Township. The zoo was recently accepted as an institutional member of the American



The students are spellbound by Monty the Python, a Burmese python who is only 9 feet now, but will nearly double his size.

### Text and photographs by Brenda Lange

Association of Zookeepers and has been approved as an educational facility by the Zoological Association of America. It expects to receive accreditation soon.

"Accreditation will show we are held to a high professional standard and that we follow all the mandated policies and procedures and are recognized for our educational work," Fortunato explained, adding that sponsorship by wildlife expert Jack Hanna has helped in the process.

Animal Junction's charges are well kept, well fed, and get hours of "enrichment" each day. Toys and entertainment keep them engaged and mentally

healthy, so they will be able to continue to help Jungle Joe teach about wildlife, like the habits of Oliver the Eurasian Eagle Owl, Monty the Python, or Fluffy the Asian Water Monitor.

The zoo isn't yet open to the public, but should be by the end of the year – it is just awaiting installation of state and federally mandated protective barriers. In the meantime, Fortunato takes the show on the road to schools, senior centers, birthday parties and other celebrations.

During presentations, Jungle Joe talks about the animals' vital statistics, behaviors, what they eat and their defenses, stressing why they are impor-



Spot the African Serval is as playful as a kitten.



Fluffy the Asian Water Monitor will grow to 6 feet and 125 pounds.



Oliver the Eurasian Eagle Owl is one of the world's best predators with excellent vision and hearing, he can spot a cricket across a football field.



Jungle Joe cradles Sydney as he would be cradled in his mother's pouch in the wild.

giggled and "eeewww's" rose from the crowd. But that is all part of the job and is offset by the affection both men are shown by other animals like Savannah the lion cub or Spot the African Serval.

Joe ties in environmental lessons on sustainability,

tant part of the world and need to be protected. Obviously some of the children would have loved to pet or hold some of Joe's charges, but as he said in his opening