

It's a jungle out there in Warminster Township

By Jesse Reilly
 Staff Writer

After more than a week in the basement, the Mullen family was happy to say see ya later, alligator, to one houseguest — literally.

A 2-year-old, 30-inch alligator, nicknamed "Allie," that was captured in a backyard in Northampton Township last week has been living in a bathtub in the family's Warminster home until a more suitable home could be found.

"Since it's an exotic animal, you can't put it in with the stray dogs we have," said Buddy Mullen, director of public works for Warminster Township. "They could have diseases that could make the others sick; you have to keep them separate."

This is Mullen's third alligator guest in about a year, and by now, the family sees the temporary pets as just a perk of dad's job.

"I was excited to have him," 11-year-old Sean Mullen said. Both Sean and his younger sister, Ashley, said the larger gator last summer had them a little nervous.

"It was 5 feet," their mother Holly said. "We kept the basement door locked."

Now veterans at housing and placing gators, the Mullens are passing the torch to Joe Fortunato, also known as "Jungle Joe," who is happy to welcome Allie into his family and new Warwick facility.

Since 2006, Animal Junction, Fortunato's traveling zoo, has been teaching children and adults about the exotic animals throughout the world with live-animal programs, according to Animal Junction Web site.

"Our main goal is education," Fortunato said. "We want to educate kids

about animal conservation and what they can do to help save natural habitats. The kids are the future so we need to start with them."

Animal Junction travels to summer camps, senior centers, libraries and schools throughout the year and before the traveling zoo's move two weeks ago to Warwick, all the animals were kept in Fortunato's home.

"We are booked throughout the summer," he said.

Teaching kids about the exotic animals will hopefully cut down on cases like Allie's, he added.

"People see them in pet stores when they're little and get them, but then can't take care of them," Fortunato said. "They think it's funny or they don't realize the danger they are causing other people and the animal by letting them go."

Although the traveling zoo now houses 60 to 70 animals, Jungle Joe said most of the animals are not acquired from donations.

"We've had a couple," he said. "But all the animals were chosen for a specific reason, all are hand selected."

The animals include an 18-foot python, a native Australian kookaburra and a kangaroo, two-toed sloths and an eagle owl.

Fortunato is hoping to expand his traveling zoo with an aardvark, monkeys, lemurs, an albino alligator and a toucan.

"I just want to make it colorful and fun," the North Philadelphia native said.

Fortunato, a former police officer who retired from the force after being injured on duty, said he came up with the idea of the first indoor/outdoor licensed and accredited zoo in Bucks

County when he was recovering in 2005.

"I've had animals since I was a child," he said, but until recently it was always just a hobby. Now, Jungle Joe is on his way to opening a zoo.

"Things have really taken off these past two years. It was like I started a Web site and everything skyrocketed," he said.

Animal Junction was the winner of the 2007-2008 People's Choice Award for Best Children's Entertainment by the Philadelphia Daily News, and with the sponsorship of wildlife educator Jack Hanna, the traveling zoo was recently accepted as an institutional member of the American Association of Zookeepers. It has also been approved as an educational facility by the Zoological Association of America, the Web site said.

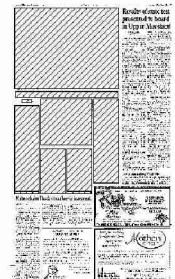
"My goal is to open the first licensed and accredited zoo in Bucks County, and right now we're just taking baby steps because that's what you have to do with these things," Fortunato said.

Permits and accreditation are a lengthy process as well as funding, which is why Animal Junction is opting to go nonprofit.

"I am going to go around to local businesses and see if they are willing to donate any supplies," he said. "I'm going to bring the kangaroo, how can you say no to a kangaroo?"

Fortunato is hoping to be accredited by the end of this year and keep doing what he loves.

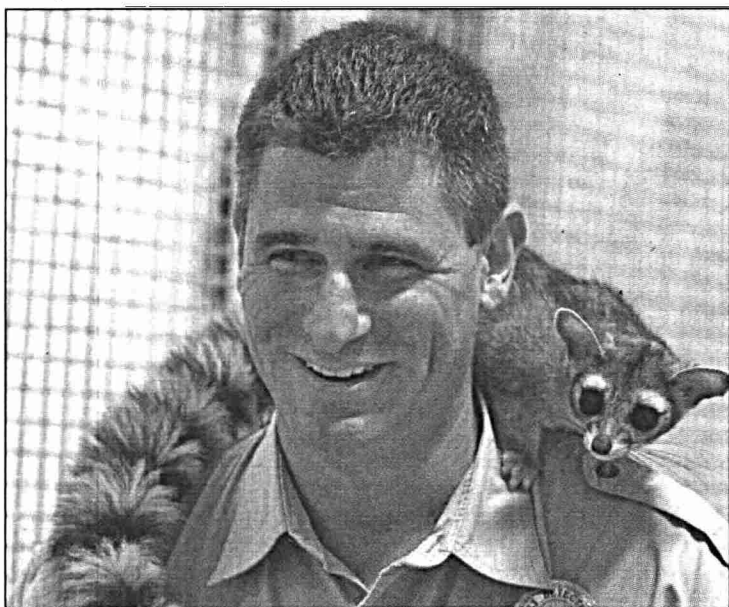
"I'm just having a great time, this is what I've always wanted to do," he said.





Spirit/Guide staff photos / REGINA RAHILL

Ashley Mullen, 10, and her brother, Sean, 11, of Warminster, say goodbye to the alligator that was caught in a Northampton Township yard last week. Their father, Buddy Mullen, is head of Warminster Township's public works department. They have been keeping the gator in their basement until it was transported to Jungle Joe's in Warwick Tuesday.



Jungle Joe, owner of Animal Junction in Warwick, has some fun with a ring-tailed cat.