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WARWICK TOWNSHIP

Jungle Joe: From police officer to zookeeper?

A lion cub, wallaby, snakes and a croc among the animals at Animal Junction.

By Katie Atkins-Carnevale
Staff Writer

From police officer to pet detective, "Jungle Joe" Fortunato's life has always been a mix of excitement and danger. When a neck injury required him to leave the police force after 17 years, Fortunato decided to expand on the "zoo" that had been growing at his own home and open a facility in Warwick Township called Animal Junction.

"I've had animals for years and when I retired from police work I wanted to do what I loved doing best and get into the animal business," he said. "I was doing all this myself when we first started and then it kept growing and growing so eventually we moved from my house to here."

Animal Junction, which is run by Fortunato and a slew of volunteers, was recently accepted as an institutional member of the American Association of



Photo by Katie Atkins Carnevale

"Jungle Joe" Fortunato poses with his first baby, "Ziggy," a blue and gold macaw he has had for 29 years.

Zookeepers and has been approved as an educational facility by the Zoological Association of America. Fortunato says there were many roadblocks in getting Animal Junction off the ground, including a

tedious permit process.

"I didn't know it was going to take six months to go through the permit process. This state is just really strict," he said. "Part

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of the requirements for the state (is deciding on a) breeding or education-type place. At first, we were going to do a breeding facility and I said 'let's do some shows, too' just to try it and see how it goes and bam!"

With all necessary permits secured, Fortunato began making connections with zoologists from all over the world to build up his collection of "babies", which now includes snakes, crocodiles, an alligator, a porcupine, a wallaby, a kinkajou, a ring-tailed cat, a lion cub, and a fennec fox, just to name a few.

"It's known that we're going to become accredited so we're very fortunate that we can get these animals on loan or trade animals back and forth," he said. "The great thing is they grow up and go back to their families so we know they are going to good

homes."

Fortunato's love of animals began when he was very young and only grew as his police career took off. He socked away his overtime money to expand his animal collection and after four years with the Philadelphia Police Department, he set off for Florida, a place he fell in love with while on a trip as a child.

He spent six years in Fort Lauderdale and returned home to join the Falls Township Police Department in 1998 and start a family. Fortunato and his wife, Tara, have a 3-year-old son Joe and a 1-year-old daughter Cathy, nicknamed "Cappy", and Animal Junction has become a family affair.

"My kids love it...they both have little junior zookeeper outfits that we had made for them. We just did Northampton Days and the Grange Fair and they hand out cards to people," he

said. "(Joe) loves coming to work. His first word was "Bubba" for Bubba the tortoise."

Fortunato has big plans for Animal Junction and is working on a wish list of future animals that includes a giraffe and a zebra.

"I'm thinking we'll be here three to five years and then we'll probably end up going non-profit so we can get grants and donation monies from corporate sponsors so then we can get a piece of property here in Bucks," he said. "We'd like to have an indoor/outdoor facility in the future."

The official grand opening for the facility is slated for November, but Animal Junction is available as a traveling teaching zoo for community events, birthday parties, schools, libraries, scout troupes, and other groups. For more information on Jungle Joe and Animal Junction, visit www.animaljunction.com.

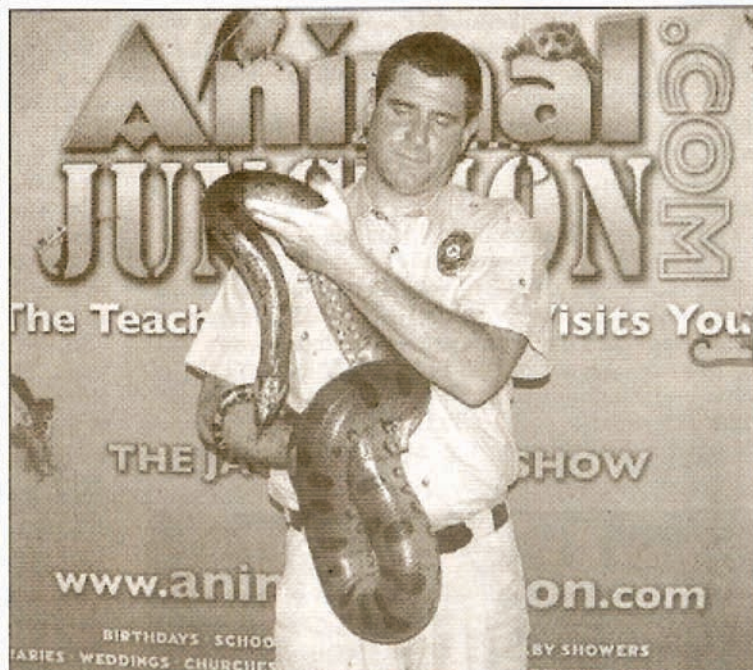


Photo by Katie Atkins-Carnevale

"Jungle Joe" Fortunato poses with Animal Junction's anaconda.