

west coast WOMAN

MAY 2023

A photograph of Deborah Robbins Millman, Executive Director of The Lemur Conservation Foundation, standing in a grassy field with two lemurs. She is wearing a light blue floral blazer over a dark blue top and dark blue pants. The background shows a line of trees and a fence.

DEBORAH Robbins Millman

Executive Director,
The Lemur Conservation Foundation

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Louise Bruderle
Editor and Publisher

just some thoughts

West Coast Woman



Deborah Robbins Millman
Photo: Louise Bruderle

Deborah Robbins Millman

I felt I was back on safari (photographic) in Kenya when I hit the road to visit this month's WCW, Deborah Robbins Millman at the Lemur Conservation Foundation in Myakka City. You head west—as in west where Fruitville Road ends—then a bit further west where asphalt ends, and then you're in deep sand that makes even an SUV twist and turn unless you go very slowly.

But instead of big game, I experienced the small creatures known as lemurs who have made Sarasota their home for years. Make that, Sarasota has made lemurs their home as their ancestral home, Madagascar, makes them at great risk for extinction.

The Foundation has an experienced, seasoned leader in Deborah. She "has more than 20 years of for-profit and nonprofit management, strategic development and animal advocacy" according to her bio, including 10 years at The Humane Society of Sarasota County.

She gave me a personal tour of the area in the conservancy where the lemurs live and, it seems, where they do a lot of playing, which was meaningful to experience given how many protections are in place to make sure they stay healthy.

For now, the conservancy does not offer visitor access, but that might change so follow them and support their work at www.lemurreserve.org.

Sad to Hear that...



Nancy Deter

Sarasota County Commissioner Nancy Deter, who has been involved in Sarasota County politics for 30 years and served in both the Florida House and Senate, died April 5.

Nancy's entry to electoral politics came in 1988 when she won a seat on the Sarasota County School Board and served one term. Nancy was elected to the Florida House of Representatives in 1998 and served through 2006, and was elected to the Florida Senate in 2008, serving through 2016. She mostly served and represented areas of south Sarasota County, including Osprey and Venice.

A Republican, Nancy was elected to the Sarasota County Commission in 2016 and subsequently

re-elected in 2020. She served as vice chair in 2017 and chair in 2018, in addition to being vice chair this year.

Out of all her awards and accolades, the bill Nancy was most proud of, according to her bio, was a bill that extends foster care from age 18 to 21. The Senate President named it the Nancy Deter Caring and Compassionate Act.

Nancy moved to Florida from Chicago in 1978 with her husband and three sons, and she founded and ran Osprey Mortgage Co. 25 years. In addition to her three children, Nancy has nine grandchildren. Kids have lost a strong advocate in Nancy. We'll miss her compassion and wit.

All Faith For Bank Leader Retiring

All Faiths Food Bank CEO Sandra Frank will retire by the end of 2023. In her 11 years at All Faiths, Frank has led the organization to rethink and re-envision the food bank to ensure that ending hunger extends beyond the traditional "food in - food out" model and targets underlying causes to end hunger before it begins.

With her board of directors and leadership team, she launched a new mission and rebranding of the organization in 2018. She also helped create the foundation for All Faiths' fundraising program, including the Campaign Against Summer Hunger, which provides food to students and their siblings during the summer months when schools are closed (see below).

While Frank has been considering retirement since 2020, a triple-header of crises—the pandemic, the resulting economic impacts, and Hurricane Ian—caused her to pause her plans. In late 2022, with professional and volunteer leadership in place and the organization's new strategic plan being implemented, she decided it was time to begin preparing for her next chapter. To learn more about All Faiths Food Bank, visit allfaithsfoodbank.org.



Sandra Frank

And Speaking of All Faiths Food Bank...

On March 26, All Faiths Food Bank held its annual Walk to End Summer Hunger, the kick-off event for the 10th annual Campaign Against Summer Hunger, which supports efforts to feed area schoolchildren—and their siblings—when they do not have access to free or reduced-cost meals and pantries at school.

More than 500 community members participated along with All Faiths staff, board members, and volunteers. \$900,000 had been raised from investors—including the Charles & Margery Barancik Foundation and Gulf Coast Community Foundation—to serve as a match for all donations made by the community.

Nearly 50% of Sarasota County and 100% of DeSoto County students rely on free and reduced-cost meals at school. The summer months can be especially difficult for the children of families struggling to put food on the table, as they lose access to these meals as well as school pantries that provide nutritional assistance during the school year.

You can contribute matching funds through May 15. Last year, approximately \$2 million was raised. With this support, All Faiths was able to provide more than 35,000 students and siblings nearly 2.5 million nutritious meals, through 333 programs and partners.

"While summertime should be a wonderful time for area children and their families, there are approximately 40,000 children in our community who are at risk of hunger this summer," said Frank. To learn how you can help feed children this summer, visit allfaithsfoodbank.org.

From this month's Good News Column

While high school students typically associate Spring Break with trips, fun and relaxation, 50+ teens recently joined Boys & Girls Clubs of Sarasota and DeSoto Counties for the 9th Annual Alternative Spring Break (ASB) on March 13-17, and dedicated hundreds of hours of community service to 12 local nonprofit organizations.

ASB is a free, annual opportunity offered by BGCSDC for all Sarasota County high school students to experience, discuss, and understand community issues in a meaningful way while earning community service hours.

"Connecting with like-minded peers to make a positive impact in our community is the best way I could possibly spend my spring break. Our generation is the future of this country. We must pay it forward and give back to the community that built us," said Sierra M., in the 11th grade at Riverview High School.

Projects included: packing and distributing food for local families in need with All Faiths Food Bank; prepping horses for classes at Prospect Riding Center, assisting with a 100th birthday celebration at Senior Friendship Centers, organizing a car wash for family and youth transport vehicles at Children First, and park beautification activities at various Sarasota County Parks, Recreation & Natural Resources sites.

"I loved attending ASB! I was able to volunteer at new places around the community and make new friends. I can't wait to come back next year," said Olivia B., a Sarasota High School 10th grader.

Other community partners who benefited from student volunteer efforts included Cat Depot, Easterseals Academy, Harvest House, The Pines of Sarasota, and Salvation Army of Sarasota County.

To learn more, visit bgcsdc.org.



Louise

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We welcome your thoughts and comments on this column and on other columns and features in this issue. You can reach us at westcoastwoman@comcast.net. We're on the web at www.WestCoastWoman.com.



DEBORAH
Robbins Millman



She's the Executive Director of the The Lemur Conservation Foundation which is "...dedicated to the preservation and conservation of the primates of Madagascar through managed breeding, scientific research, education, and art," and they do that successfully in Myakka City.



ky, so these button-eyed, cute little creatures have something to do with species extinction? Yes, they're the world's most endangered mammals due in large part because their natural habitat in Madagascar is shrinking as a result of deforestation.

Enter The Lemur Conservation Foundation (LCF) which is "dedicated to the preservation and conservation of the primates of Madagascar through managed breeding, scientific research, education, and art," and they do that in Myakka City. How does that work?

Visiting their location takes you out to the Florida of days gone by—past the cattlefeds, soy farms, plant nurseries and older ranch homes—to a secluded and quiet, almost Jurassic Park like location with vast spaces, high fences, large enclosures and tall trees.

The Foundation recently cleaned up from Hurricane Ian that cut a violent diagonal path through the state after leaving the Fort Myers area and took down some 60 trees that damaged fencing, causing the animals to have to stay in their enclosures. Now that the cleanup is complete, the lemurs live in large open spaces where they can move freely, but with fencing to protect them from other creatures as well as keep them from drifting off. In total, LCF has some 130 acres in total with animals living in approximately 20 of those acres.

Madagascar has suffered extensively from deforestation, and it's the only place that lemurs live, making them the world's most endangered group of mammals. More specifically, 98% of lemur species are threatened in the next 20 years or critically endangered.

That's a tall order keeping this species from going extinct. Fortunately, the Foundation has an experienced CEO at the helm who has decades of experience in for-profit and nonprofit management and strategic development and has worked with animal advocacy nonprofits. Deborah was also an award-winning journalist and vice president of a public relations firm who came on board at LCF in 2010.

A good part of Deborah's career has been in animal advocacy, locally with the Humane Society of Sarasota County which she ran for a decade, overseeing its conversion to a no-kill facility.

Most recently, she spent eight years with the Humane Society of the United States, in different locations including five years in Cape Cod, then in Fort Lauderdale. "Everything fits together," she reflects, adding, "I've been lucky. I've loved every job I've had." And, she's always loved animals, had pets growing up, and her dog often comes to work with her.

We walked from the Foundation's office to the animals' location. In the enclosure, there's plenty of room for the 54 lemurs who live at LCF to move about and climb—much as they would do had they been born in Madagascar. March was "baby season" and they're cautiously saving three babies, including twins, were born. That's the result of nine lemur pairs chosen for breeding.

The Foundation's managed breeding program follows recommendations from the Association of Zoos and Aquariums Species Survival Plan. It's a carefully curated process that involves working with other nonprofits who have lemurs to ensure genetic diversity. The Lemur Conservation Foundation protects 16 species of lemurs.

LCF is unlike other animal attractions like Jungle Gardens or Big Cat Habitat. For one thing, they're a nonprofit, managed breeding and research center. For another, too much activity can stress the animals. But aligning the public with the Foundation's goals is also vital.

"It's imperative—critical—that people

know what we do," Deborah states, but visiting for now is limited, something she's found people accept. She adds that her board of directors are, "very savvy" because they have an endowment to cover their operations. LCF, she explains, relies 100% on private, corporate and individual donors as well as foundations.

When not out in the open, running, playing and climbing, the lemurs are running through an elaborate network of caged tunnels that take them to their enclosures where they go to eat and sleep. Interestingly, their enclosures have toddler toys—sleds, swings and the like, to entertain them. They're curious, cute and cuddly-looking, but not suitable as pets. They can also bite and scratch and need room and again, they're an endangered species that lives in groups but the scientific term is "a conspiracy."

Deborah and her staff of 8 (another 4 are in Madagascar) have multiple responsibilities in addition to the care of the animals. This includes education—informed the public and students—as well as research in which scientists can come to study free-range lemur colonies under natural conditions.

LCF also has a presence in the SAVA Region of northeastern Madagascar where they work with conservation partners and communities bordering protected lemur habitats. LCF's Erik Paton and Research Director, Dr. Chris Spens, spends 2-3 months there overseeing things along with 3 staff members. Programs there are in Anjanaharibe-Sud Special Reserve (ASSR) and Marojejy National Park, together spanning 30 square miles of mountainous rainforest.

In addition to losing their natural habitat in Madagascar, the animals are pushed out by farming and yes, some are hunted and eaten. To help curtail those issues, LCF has created fish farming so the local population can eat other forms of protein. In the spirit of cooperation, LCF also offers medical services for people there including prenatal care and assists other agencies. For example, providing fuel efficient stoves can mean less wood and preserving the rainforest.

And then there's their art program. Lemurs are incredibly photogenic and The Lemur Conservation Foundation has an art collection which includes lemur-themed work by artists Jean Blackburn, Craig Rubadoux, Judy North, Joseph Santore, Barbara Sandler, and Alexis Rockman, as well as LCF founder and artist Penelope Body-Sanders.

Future plans at the Foundation call for a new habitat building, a vet clinic and a quarantine space. The reason they have so much acreage is to act as a "buffer" to development so that Sarasota is experiencing in great numbers.

Loss of a species is tragic enough, but also causes serious collateral problems. For example, lemur traps pollute on their fur and they're "seed dispersers." Saving them saves the lives of other animals as well.

Still, you may ask what's the big deal if a species doesn't exist anymore? "We're all connected," Deborah explains. "People say, 'Oh, they're so cute, but to lose a species is a tragedy.'"

Deborah feels strongly we are, "stewards" with a responsibility to not let animals die off. "We owe it to the Earth to maintain what we inherited from our parents."

Of her role at LCF and the role it plays as stewards she states, "It's a great opportunity to make a difference, plus it's awesome to see them up close."

STORY & IMAGES: Louise Bruderle

NOTE: Penelope Body-Sanders incorporated the nonprofit in 1996 and is the visionary and founder of the Lemur Conservancy Foundation which is now in its 27th year. Please find an accompanying article in this issue with a detailed look at the Foundation's history.

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get to know

The Lemur Conservation Foundation

Founded in 1996 by Penelope Bodry-Sander, their mission is to save and protect endangered lemurs

Inspired by the work of Dr. Ian Tattersall (Curator Emeritus, Division of Anthropology Professor Emeritus, Richard Gilder Graduate School American Museum of Natural History) and alarmed by lemurs' spiraling decline, museum educator Penelope Bodry-Sanders incorporated a nonprofit in 1996.

Originally named the Lower Primate Conservation Foundation, the reserve's initial 40 acres were purchased in 1997 and Bodry-Sanders set up camp - literally - on the grounds.

Within four years, a nine-acre forested lemur enclosure was opened on land in Myakka City. An office and research center soon followed. The initial 11 lemurs from the Duke Lemur Center arrived at their new home in 1999.



Founder and former LCF executive director, Penelope Bodry-Sanders

In 1998, Penelope retired from New York's American Museum of Natural History after serving over 18 years in a number of capacities, but primarily as education coordinator for the museum's international education travel program. She continues her AMNH affiliation as a field associate in the Division of Anthropology.

Her biography, *African Obsession: The Life and Legacy of Carl Akeley*, about the legendary hunter-taxidermist, was published in 1991 and again in 1998. An Explorers Club Fellow since 1999, she received an Audubon Together-Green Leadership Fellowship in 2010.

Penelope's own path to conservation was anything but conventional: she was Dominican nun and an actress/singer on and off Broadway before she founded LCF. Today she makes paintings that celebrate animals undervalued or loathed, mostly yhenas, lemurs, and invertebrates. She envisioned a comprehensive conservation initiative where art complements science, research dovetails with education, and a breeding program in the United States provides a safety net for native lemur populations, supporting conservation programs in Madagascar. Penelope served as LCF's executive director until 2010.

In 2000, LCF welcomed its first transfers, two critically endangered mongoose lemurs. A year later, the foundation partnered with University of Miami anthropologist Dr. Linda Taylor to host its first field-school program for college students.

The mongoose lemurs produced the first infant at the Myakka City reserve, Alejandro, born in 2002.

On the education front, the foundation saw the publication of *Ny Aloy Aka* (Ako the Aye-Aye), the first in a series of children's books in Malagasy and English written by the late Dr. Alison Jolly and illustrated by Deborah Ross. The Aka Project became the cornerstone of LCF's conservation education programs in the United States and Madagascar. LCF continued acquiring land in Myakka City, adding roads, ponds, lemur shelters, and a second forest habitat. At the same time, LCF funded a new museum and interpretive center for the Tampolo Reserve in Madagascar. Capping its first decade, LCF earned certification from the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) as a certified related facility.

The Lemur Conservation Foundation mission is "...the

Lemurs have room to climb trees and live in a similar way to their native and also sub-tropical Madagascar



To feed or to seek refuge, lemurs have safe access to enclosures through tunnels

Two ring-tailed lemurs who live on the reserve



LCF offers fish farming training to the people of Madagascar



LCF also offers fuel-efficient stoves to help reduce deforestation

- Restoring lemur habitat
- Fuel-efficient cook stoves
- Decreasing dependence on the rainforest
- Public health initiatives
- Providing voluntary family planning
- Ecotourism infrastructure
- Camp Indri, ASSR's only established campsite
- Forest monitoring
- Removing lemur bushmeat traps
- Lemur population surveys
- Improving estimates of silky sifaka population size

Although stunningly rich in biodiversity, Madagascar is also exceptionally poor in almost every quality-of-life measure tracked by the United Nations and World Bank. Population is exploding, and most Malagasy live on less than \$1 per day.

Poverty and political instability have undermined Madagascar's environmental management. Slash and burn agriculture, selective logging of precious wood (rosewood and ebony), and illegal wood harvesting has accelerated deforestation and erosion, which in turn has altered microclimates, leading to droughts, forest fires, and soil degradation. Bushmeat hunting of lemurs has also increased in recent years due to a lack of alternative protein sources in rural villages as well as the emergence of a commercial bushmeat trade. LCF conservation programs on the ground in Madagascar are helping to protect lemurs and their habitat.

Scientific study is central to the Lemur Conservation Foundation's mission. Accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), the 130-acre Myakka City Lemur Reserve encompasses fenced forests where many of the resident lemurs range freely. This habitat invites authentic behaviors, enabling scientific research and field training programs.

In addition to independent research, professors regularly bring students to Myakka City for intensive field schools incorporated into for-credit courses at their universities. At LCF, students can observe lemurs in a controlled but natural setting, allowing future primatologists to gain valuable firsthand field experience.

Lemurs are Madagascar's most famous and recognized ambassadors, but they are the most endangered group of mammals on the planet. With 98% of all lemur species considered threatened with extinction, Madagascar embodies all of the drivers of the ongoing biodiversity crisis: habitat destruction, overexploitation, pollution, invasive and introduced species, and climate change.

Lemurs act as an umbrella species. By protecting lemurs, we protect large habitats that support countless plants and animals that are found only on Madagascar.

Lemurs are a window into our evolutionary past. They provide scientists with compelling clues about our earliest primate ancestors, the evolution of human intelligence, and how we came to differ from other species. To better understand ourselves, we must first have a better understanding of lemurs.

For more information or to make a donation, visit www.lemurreserve.org.

STORY and IMAGES: Louise Bruderle

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preservation and conservation of the primates of Madagascar through managed breeding, scientific research, education, and art."

A large island nation (bigger than California or France) off the southeast coast of Africa, Madagascar is one of the world's hottest biodiversity hotspots, and the only place where lemurs are found naturally.

From LCF's office in the SAVA region of northeastern Madagascar, staff work with conservation partners and communities bordering protected lemur habitats. Our work focuses on Anjanaharibe-Sud Special Reserve (ASSR) and Marojejy National Park, together spanning 320 square miles of mountainous rainforests. Dr. Erik Patel, LCF's Conservation & Research Director, manages our field conservation programs, traveling to Madagascar twice each year.

Nominated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, ASSR spans 108 square miles and is home to at least 11 species of lemurs, including critically endangered indri and silky sifakas, which are one of the rarest mammals in the world. LCF established Camp Indri in ASSR as an ecotourism destination.

LCF is leading lemur conservation efforts in the SAVA region in the following ways:

- Overnight student fieldtrips to the rainforest
- Educating Madagascar's next generation of conservationists
- Fish farming training
- Reducing dependence on lemur bushmeat hunting
- Reforestation