

DR. GABBY WILD'S WILD LIFE

BY MALKIE SCHULMAN

Dr. Gabby Zonenshine, better known to the public as Dr. Gabby Wild, DVM, MPH, CVA, has aspired to be a vet for as long as she can remember.

"I was always crazy about anything to do with animals. I've been riding horses since I was four years old and owned all kinds of pets throughout my childhood," she shares.

From a young age, Gabby maintained an animal-related blog. When explaining how she acquired the nickname "Wild," which isn't her actual last name, Gabby says, "My friends called me 'Gabby Wild.' Later, when I established an animal-related charity, I used that name. *National Geographic* featured the charity, and that's how it stuck."

EARLY ANIMAL BONDING – FROM FLORIDA TO PARIS TO THAILAND

Gabby was born in Florida but moved temporarily to Paris when she was very young, attended school in Europe, and then returned to Florida for her high school years.

"My father was an infectious disease doctor, specializing in treating Aids, so he traveled around the world a lot," shares Gabby, "especially treating patients in poverty-stricken third-world countries. Since he was away much of the time, my grandfather raised me to a great extent. I was always badgering him to let me have a pigeon nursery, then a cat and a dog."

When Gabby was 16, she was sent as a student ambassador from the U.S. with a group of other schoolmates to Japan.

"I sent my mom a picture of me taken with a deer resting its head on my lap under a bonsai tree," Gabby recalls. "Animals read your energy and feed off it. I always had a sensitivity and respect for animals and they feel it."

Gabby's parents were always very supportive of her love of all things animal, so in the summer of that same year, they agreed to let her fly to Thailand to work at the Royal Elephant Stables. Although she was still a young teenag-

er — and a female one at that — Gabby managed to gain the trust of the king's vets, and they taught her a lot about elephant behavior, allowing her to assist with their care.

"Every summer after that, I came back to work with a lot of experi-

ence that way," says Gabby.

This experience proved invaluable when, at 21, while finishing college, Gabby once again visited Thailand. It was during this visit that she met Khun Chai, a baby elephant in distress. He had been separated from his mother at an early age and lost his surrogate elephant mom when she died in a mudslide. He was depressed and wouldn't eat. The staff was hoping Gabby would be able to help him.

Given her knowledge of elephant behavior, Gabby realized Khun Chai didn't want overt attention

"So when I went into his enclosure, I just sat there quietly. And when I looked at him, it was just out of the corner of my eye," she explains. "About 30 minutes later, he came up and tapped me with his trunk. He realized that I was the only person who didn't give him too much attention. From that moment, we were inseparable. Khun Chai became my baby. He followed me around everywhere."

For all the TLC (tender loving care)



Gabby offers her patients, however, she is firm in her belief that it is unwise to ever let your guard down when around them. They're still wild animals, and you can never trust a wild animal not to harm you. Even if you've hand-raised a lion from birth, their natural behaviors can kick in and kill a person. Even their way of showing love can be physically harmful to a human.

"And there are no wild animals that are not potentially dangerous," she warns. "A tiny owl can tear someone's eyes out, elephants can beat someone to death or gore someone with their tusks, and giraffes can kick."

WILD AT HEART

Today, Gabby is married with three young children. Her family also includes a little dog named Pixie and a horse named Bucephalus, after Alexander the Great's horse.

Gabby's love for living beings doesn't come as a surprise. "I get it from my dad," she says. "He was a remarkable human being who lived to help others and his work was inspirational to me. I just don't do people. My sister is a 'human' doctor. Yuck," she adds with a laugh. "My soul always gravitated to helping animals."

Her love for all animals, notwithstanding, Gabby claims her real passion has always been wild animals.



Taking care of feathered friends

"I want to have a larger impact in the world," she shares. "Not only in a zoo setting, but in a global setting, to keep all species of animals flourishing in the wild."

In that role, Gabby has traveled the world as a wildlife vet. She's tended to almost every type of wild animal from hyenas to rhinos to giraffes to shoe-billed storks and tigers and many more. Her professional duties include everything from dental work to labor and delivery to surgery. When she's not traveling, Gabby works at Turtleback Zoo in New Jersey and the rest of the week she runs a non-profit organization (NPO) called The Gabby Wild Foundation, Inc. in Manhattan. "Our primary goal," Gabby explains, "is to reinforce the rain forests in the Indonesian islands of Sumatra, Java and Borneo."

Every day presents a new adventure for Gabby, even when she's not operating in the wild.

"Just yesterday, I was caring for a sick owl at the zoo," she shares. "The little fellow was taking his time waking up from the anesthesia I'd administered. Like a baby, I kept him warm and cozy, gently rocking him to consciousness. My teammates were laughing because I played baby ballet music to help him wake up. It worked wonders, though because I'm happy to report he's now back to his old curmudgeon self—which, in his case, means he's doing just fine."

Gabby describes one of her scariest encounters with a wild animal.

"Often, I see tooth and gum decay in big cats that live in zoos because they don't get enough necessary nutrients. One time," Gabby recalls, "I was performing a root canal on a jaguar named Pirate in Belize, Central America when a lightning storm struck and the power went out." Gabby wasn't concerned because she knew the zoo had two back-up generators. Midway through the procedure, however, the first generator blew. "I still didn't lose my cool even though I had my fingers in the jaguar's mouth," Gabby continues, "because I knew there was a second generator." Then with Gabby's hand still in the jaguar's mouth and with less than two minutes before the anesthesia would wear off, the second generator stopped! As fast as she could, making sure Pirate was OK, Gabby finished her work and helped get him back to his enclosure. She had barely gotten out of the cage when he woke up with a mighty roar.

Although Gabby continues to travel the world in a professional capacity, her trips have been seriously curtailed due to the arrival of her children. "I used to be on the road all the time. Now I travel every few months for 2-3 weeks at a time."

Of course, all her traveling to remote parts of the world for weeks at a time begs the question – how is it possible as an Orthodox Jewish woman to make it work?

DOING IT THE KOSHER WAY

"We were not a religious family, but we were very Jewish," Gabby shares about her childhood.

Gabby's first real exposure to authentic Judaism began at age 15 when her older sister, 13 years her senior, embraced religion.

"She served as a role model to me after I became religious," Gabby says.

However, it was at 18, during the "March of the Living" sponsored by her synagogue, when Gabby truly felt inspired to delve deeper into her faith. Accompanied by



her mother of Syrian descent, who wished to better understand what her husband's European family had endured during the Holocaust, Gabby had a profound realization. She was struck by the depth of knowledge that her religious peers on the trip had about their heritage, information she felt she lacked.

"I remember asking my mother why I didn't know any of the songs these kids were singing. I would go to synagogue on Saturday and then go horseback riding. Why didn't I know what these kids knew?"

This experience marked the beginning of Gabby's journey towards observant Judaism.

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"After graduation, I went to Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, and became close with the Chabad rabbi and rebbetzin there who've become like second parents to me. Little by little, I took on Shabbat observance, kashrut and tziniut and other Jewish laws. I even took off time to go attend Mayanot seminary in Israel."

Being halachically observant in the field, claims Gabby, is not as hard as you might imagine. You just need to think creatively at times.

"For example," Gabby says, "the developing nations like Asia, where there are many Muslims, are very respectful of men and women not touching each other so that's not something I have to worry about when I travel there. In Western countries, where they aren't as understanding, I will try to make a small bow in the way of greeting."

Regarding neutering an animal, Gabby explains that there are different halachic perspectives. The most stringent view holds that unless an animal is sick, it can't be



▲ A routine checkup on an elephant

◀ Performing surgery on a leopard

neutered. A more lenient stance allows neutering by a student for the sake of learning.

"For me, it turned into a non-issue since I embraced full observance midway through vet school," Gabby shares.

By then, she had performed the procedure numerous times. When her professors requested it again, she presented them with a letter from her rabbi, which clarified that Jewish law only permits neutering if medically necessary. She also highlighted her proven competence in this area from her years prior to becoming fully observant. Thankfully, the professors accommodated her by waiving the requirement. In the field, if neutering is necessary, Gabby ensures a non-Jew performs it. Nonetheless, she emphasizes that this issue is typically irrelevant as her primary role is to preserve species, not diminish them.

In accordance with her Sephardi husband's wishes, Gabby wears head scarves instead of wigs, a practice that poses no problem in the jungle. Alongside this, however, she wears safari pants, long sleeves, and high socks, a practical attire she deems necessary. This outfit not only facilitates quick movement should she need to make a hasty exit, but it also ensures complete coverage against bites from malaria-carrying insects.

So as not to run into any problems with Shabbos, Gabby's work schedule precludes traveling on Fridays.

She even avoids Saturday night traveling because it gets too stressful.

Her creativity is put to the test when finding kosher food to eat. "People will often say to me, 'Oh, so you go vegetarian when you're traveling.' Unfortunately,"

Gabby explains, there's often no clean water in the developing countries I visit so unless I want to get a disease (which I don't), I can't eat the fruits and vegetables."

Instead, Gabby travels with lots of canned tuna fish, peanut butter and power bars.

"One time," Gabby recalls, my friend caught a fish in Lake Victoria in Uganda and offered to split it with me. So, I went to the store, bought a pan, toiled it and was able to share the fresh fish with him. Or there are times when I will buy a pot and cook up some rice to eat." Since the rice comes straight from the rice paddies, she doesn't have to worry about non-kosher additives.

CHAMPIONING WORLDWIDE WILDLIFE PROTECTION

In addition to being an observant Jew with all that entails, Gabby is also, atypical for a wildlife vet, a female. This was a challenge, she admits, when she first started working in the developing nations. In Thailand, the “mahouts” – the elephant trainers – were reluctant to collaborate with her until the Thai vets vouched for her training and skills, stating, “We trained her, she attended Cornell, and she’s good.” After witnessing her resolve problems they had been facing with their elephants for years, they finally relented.

“Now, I have a reputation, so they request me,” she shares. “The truth is, I’m not here to change cultural perspectives. Nevertheless, I find it gratifying that they can now view a female veterinarian as equal to a male one.”

Your typical vet in New York City, say, usually will see house pets like dogs, cats, rabbits and maybe an exotic bird. Gabby’s typical patients include animals such as the hellbender, an aquatic giant salamander, the largest amphibian in North America which usually provides for a lot more excitement on the job. For example, one time over 100 hellbenders came down with a disease at the zoo. Each amphibian needed its own container to prevent it from spreading the disease further. Additionally, some of the hellbenders had gotten into territorial fights with other hellbenders and were also scraped up. Gabby and her team had to care for their open wounds. Naturally, these animals had no understanding that they were being helped so they did what they could to escape treatment.

“Except for one hellbender,” shares Gabby. “It was like this little guy knew we were there to help him. He’d always remain perfectly still while we treated him, even when we gave him his shot. I called him my little buddy.”

If you think calming human patients down is hard before a procedure, then I don’t suggest you work with wild animals. Gabby deals daily with issues like “My patient has a slipped disc. How do I manage care with him when all he wants to do is eat me?” Or sometimes she needs to draw blood. Wild animals, however, are not typically cool with that so Gabby will have to first anesthetize them.

“Either I use a tranquilizing gun or a blow dart to anesthetize the animal. Some animals will permit a hand syringe,” she explains.

Through Gabby’s patients in the wild, she meets the indigenous cultures living there.

“I find the lives of the people and the animals are completely intertwined,” says Gabby. “We have to work with the villagers so they can understand why the animals are causing conflict. With that understanding, we can work towards a solution.”

For example, in South America, the jaguars were eating the farmers’ goats. Gabby and her team taught the farmers how to protect their goats without having to kill the jaguars. The same occurs with the elephants destroying farms in Africa and Asia.

“We must all work together,” Gabby maintains, “because all animals are necessary to the ecosystem.”

This is why Gabby’s rainforest preservation organization is so dear to her heart. The rainforests of Sumatra and Borneo, she explains, are bio-diverse places that are even older than the Amazon. They include many different species of animals all of whom need their natural habitat in which to live. The Sumatran rainforest, for example,



▲ Examining a Sumatran elephant

◀ Gabby with her husband and children

hosts, among many others, orangutans, rhinos, and its own species of tiger and elephant. “Our organization is doing the vital work of keeping them alive.”

To that end, she shares her concern for human behavior that harms animals on a global level.

“There’s nothing wrong with the fact that our human population is growing,” Gabby says, “but how we take care of our land and nature to facilitate its growth does make a difference. I feel honored to enable animals to live their lives.”

“For example, one problem at hand is that humans are over-farming, and in the process, they’re taking over the animals’ territory. The destruction of the animals’ natural habitat (the rainforests, for example) causes the animals to get secluded in small pockets

cosis in frogs. An example of this is the drought in Kenya, which raises the question of who should get access to limited water resources: farmers or animals? Of course, farmers get priority, but desperately thirsty elephants are aware of this and will raid the farms to obtain water.

Poaching is another problem. Every species is vital to the existence of other species. Poaching reduces their numbers.

“The problem is that everything is being done in excess,” says Gabby, like overfishing and over-farming. “Everything can be done, just in moderation.”

Gabby has strong convictions about the work she does and its source in the Torah.

“Hashem begins the Torah with the creation of His beautiful world. Man is enjoined to take charge of Hashem’s world and not mess it up. We’re only here for a short period of time. Hashem wants us to choose to do what’s good, even when it’s not easy. The garbage is piling up in our oceans. People are consuming way too much. Every action has an effect on our world.”

She queries, “Why do you think the Torah talks about the animals in the Ark? It should just talk about the people if that’s all that counts. Instead, the Torah delineates each species and that’s because G-d wants us to view the world holistically and act accordingly. In other words, taking care of the environment matters.”

At a fundraising party she hosted to raise funds for the elephants her organization protects, Gabby spoke to the women about this concept.

“What did G-d require of Avraham to tell Eliezer to find in a wife for his son?” she asked. “Did He say, ‘Look for a woman who helps the orphan and the widow?’ No, he said, ‘Look for the woman who helps the animal – who’s there in the small detail – who cares even about the camels. This will show her level of chessed (kindness).’”

As she travels the world, Gabby is acutely aware of her role as a representative of the Jewish people.

“I recognize how people look at me, as a Jew. As my father would always say, ‘You may forget you’re a Jew, but the world never will.’ We are a priestly nation, and our mission is to serve all the nations as representatives of G-d in His world. And that includes the animal kingdom.” ▲

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of forests thus separating them from other gene pools of their kind. The animals don’t travel to other pockets of rainforests and so reproduction of the species is halted. Also, many species need to move and migrate. They die out if they only have a small area to live in.”

Human carelessness has accelerated the release of “greenhouse” gases into the environment, which has led to significant changes in the biosphere. These changes have affected the survival of various species, limiting their access to natural resources like water and increasing their susceptibility to infectious diseases such as chytridiomycosis.