



My ASL Family and Other Animals

BY ALICE IACUessa P '82 (ASL 1979–2000) &
CATHY ADAMS (ASL 1974–2005)

AST spring, The Durrells, a TV series set in 1935 and based on the memories of a 10-year-old Gerald Durrell living in Corfu with his impulsive and boisterous family, aired in the UK. The story focuses on Louisa Durrell, a widow, and her four impetuous children—Larry, Leslie, Margo and Gerry. The series was shown in the US last fall.

Gerald Durrell, the youngest of the brood, went on to become a celebrated naturalist, conservationist and author. In 1959, he established the Jersey Zoo, now the flourishing Durrell Wildlife Park. ‘Gerry’ believed that zoos have a responsibility to save endangered species from extinction. The park’s philosophy states, “We are the champions of all animals...including the ‘little guys,’ the inconspicuous creatures that are just as crucial to the ecology of the planet as the more appealing ones. We speak up for animals that other people forget.” At the Durrell Wildlife Park, these species breed and recover in number, while conservationists observe them to determine what steps should be taken to introduce them back into the wild.

So what is the ASL connection? Beginning in the late 60s, **Wally Foster (ASL 1968–74)**, head of the science department, organized a series of ASL middle school trips to Jersey, which included a visit to Durrell’s zoo, and the naturalist made a return visit to ASL to address students in the gym. **Sally Marlow (ASL 1964–95)** and **Tony Marlow (ASL 1964–96)** went on several of these successful excursions, even though things didn’t always go to plan. The first ASL group took a bus to Southampton and then boarded a small plane for the short flight to Jersey. Almost immediately, things went wrong. Five minutes into the flight, the pilot reported engine problems and the need to return to Southampton. Sally, a reluctant flyer, wanted to climb under her seat but was desperate to be a good role model to the 20 students in the rows behind. Back in

Southampton, the group waited for an hour and then re-boarded the plane. A smooth take off...“Phew!” she whispered to Tony. The pilot’s voice over the tannoy did not inspire confidence, “Well, I’m not sure we’ve fixed the problem entirely—it might still be an issue—but we’ll soldier on and see what happens!” How Sally managed the rest of the flight is lost to history.

Happily, the group made a safe landing in Jersey and went on to enjoy visiting the zoo, castle, tide pools, and lots more. To this day, Sally remembers that flight and wonders if any of those students remember it too?

Karen Bachant Sellars (ASL 1968–2004) was on the same trip, but since she was even more petrified of flying than Sally, she agreed to go only if she could travel by boat! She sailed, sleeping overnight on the floor of the Jersey ferry, and eventually made her way to meet the group, having missed all the excitement of the flight.

Dave Sutherland (ASL 1970–98) accompanied Wally Foster on several trips to the Jersey Zoo. Anyone who has read Gerry Durrell’s memoirs of living on Corfu knows that he gave endearing names to the animals he collected. There was Augustus Tickleumy, a

spade-footed toad, who liked to lie on his back and have his stomach massaged; and Lampedusa, an owl given to him by the reclusive Countess Mavrodaki. This penchant for giving animals colorful names continued into Durrell’s adulthood, and was a feature at the zoo. Dave remembers a variety of these animals with their unusual personalities: Chumley the Chimp was an animal that Durrell bought in Cameroon. It smoked cigars and apparently thought it was human. In Jersey, the ape became very eccentric and developed the habit of mixing his



I am Chumley the Chimp

faeces with straw and rolling this mixture into balls, which, when provoked, he threw at visitors! Some of the students knew of this habit and would take novices to see Chumley, goading him until he threw his missiles, the experienced students hiding behind the first-time visitors.

The students also had an unusual experience with Pedro the Spectacled Bear. Pedro was the first of what is now a successful program of breeding spectacled bears and reintroducing them back into the wild. Wally and Dave were taking a group of about 15 students around the zoo one morning and their first stop was Pedro’s enclosure, which was on a large uphill slope with a little hut in the middle; there was no Pedro in sight. Wally started to explain how these bears were endangered, when Pedro emerged from his hut; the students yelled their approval at his appearance. Wally



1

continued his talk explaining that money was needed to get Pedro a mate, only for Pedro to begin to urinate. He must have been coming out of hibernation because he urinated until a little river was flowing toward them at the bottom of his enclosure. Wally was still chirping on, but the students were no longer listening; they were mesmerized by the yellow stream heading swiftly in their direction!

Eventually Pedro finished and sat back on his haunches facing the group in full-frontal pose. Pandemonium ensued; students were laughing to the point of convulsions; others were hiding their eyes; and all the while Wally continued to pontificate about mating schemes, endangered species, and much-needed funds. If there had been smart phones and YouTube in the 70's, the footage would have gotten millions of hits.



Frisky the Mandrill was a special project taken on by the Middle School. Students rallied to raise money for housing and finding a mate for Frisky. Of course, when the students visited the zoo they wanted to see Frisky and would stand outside his cage and yell his name. This spooked the mandrill so much that it hid continuously. Dave is not sure the students ever got to see their beneficiary.

Although the encounters took place more than 40 years ago, many former students treasure their memories from visits to Jersey and talks by Durrell at ASL.

Beth (Lause) Simpson '78 was inspired by her trip to Jersey. She reports from Colorado, “I have devoted my life to animals and have a very successful training business—thanks to Mr. Durrell for starting me off on the right foot.”

Laura Benson '76, who took a trip to Durrell's zoo while in Grade 8 at ASL recalls, “We went to Jersey to further our studies of animal conservation.

It was an incredibly inspiring trip, which grew out of a sense of commitment to save endangered animals.”

David Turner '76 has fond memories of visiting Jersey. He says, “In addition to visiting the wildlife park, I remember the drive from the airport and back, during which we were given an overview of the island's history. As I recall, we were told of a legend that in the medieval era: criminals were thrown from a cliff, but pardoned if they survived (I do not know whether there is any truth to this legend). The wildlife part itself was, of course, the highlight of the trip and indeed a highlight of the three years I spent at ASL.”

Jamie Burnett '77 attended the talk at ASL and made the journey to Jersey in middle school. His lifelong love of animals was sparked at ASL. Jamie relates, “I was a huge Gerald Durrell fan and had all of his books. I was also a member of the World Wildlife Association and a member of the young zoologist club at the London Zoo.”

For Karen Sellars, the connection with the Jersey Zoo lasted long after the school trips. She was inspired by Gerry Durrell's philosophy. Jersey Zoo's conservation ideas stand out in her memory as a reaffirmation of her own view on environmental teaching: hands-on, out-of-the-classroom learning and conservation. This became part of the ASL science ethos in the years to come. She credits Gerald Durrell's Jersey Zoo with influencing ASL's middle school thinking and contributing much to the environmentally focused trips the Middle School made in later years.

ASL's connection with Gerald Durrell went beyond the zoo. Gerald Durrell was a friend of Marlene Dietrich's daughter, Maria Riva, and she sent several of her sons to ASL, one of whom was **David Riva '79**. He remembers how his family, Gerald Durrell and founding headmaster **Stephen Eckard (ASL 1951–71)** were close. When David grew up,



he became a lifetime member of the Jersey Zoological Trust, thanks to his engagement with Gerald Durrell as a boy. David spent time with Gerry and wife Jacquie over a period of 30 years. He visited the zoo more than 100 times, traveled extensively with Stephen Eckard, and even rented the cottage owned by Eckard and **Peter Waller (ASL 1951–71)** on Corfu. This same cottage was purchased some years later by **Chris Siegfroid (ASL 1961–98)** and **Dick Tener (ASL 1969–98)**. On one trip, David and his family stayed in a little



house not far from where Dr. Theodore Stephanides resided, Gerry's early scientific inspiration, who guided him in all things entomological. At one point, David retraced Gerry's early adventures on Corfu.

David describes Gerry, “He was quite simply a wonder. He was a simple man with grand ideas and a penchant for life. He crisscrossed the globe, following his passion and love for animals. His books are full of humor, life and chaos—just as he was. His zoo is a haven for some of the world's most endangered species, and despite his death in 1995, the work continues in earnest. Gerry's commitment to education and his deep friendship with Peter Waller and Steven Eckard led him to ASL, where he found a good number of us students, eager to delve into the natural world that he had described in his early books. His visits to the School were always a high point. Not a day goes by that I don't miss Gerry, Stephen, and Peter. The three of them inspired and shaped me.”



I am Pedro
the Spectacled Bear



Durrell was charming and funny, self-deprecating. He told great stories and didn't talk down to us.

Alumna and past parent Felice Hawley '76 P '13 visited Durrell's zoo in 1970 along with her Grade 6 peers. Here she recalls her happy memories of the trip:

I remember that year, 1969–70, all us Grade 6 students were very active in the World Wildlife Fund (WWF, now the World Wide Fund for Nature). In fact, a chapter of the charity was created just for ASL—complete with our own button badge, depicting a buffalo head. No doubt at all, we were animal lovers!

A WWF official visited the Middle

School, then residing at York Gate, where Grade 6 had the run of the top floor.

I was already a big fan of Gerald Durrell. When we first moved to London, I went to a British girls' school and the teacher read to us every afternoon from *My Family and Other Animals*. My mother and I loved all of his books, so I already knew about the zoo and some of the animals that Durrell had collected.

I don't recall how many sixth graders went on the trip, but it was a big group—most of the class, I think. One of my most distinct memories is just being at Gatwick

Airport—we flew to Jersey and back in a day. It was my first time at Gatwick and it seemed empty, cavernous and very quiet. Every time I go there now and feel how crowded and busy it is, I remember that spring trip to Jersey!

It was still cold and gray at home, and the island seemed so lovely and warm in comparison, with wildflowers growing in the stone walls lining the lanes. The air smelled of flowers.

At the zoo, there was a lot of running around. The mandrills were the big favorite—lots of giggling at the colorful bottom of one specific male. I'm not sure if it was then or later that our class adopted the mandrill—making him 'ours.' And I always had a thing for owls and there were a few of those.

It was an attractive place, and felt more 'natural' than London's zoo, certainly; smaller, with more unusual animals.

After visiting the zoo, in the late afternoon, we headed for the beach. We didn't swim, but we took our shoes off and had a ball trying to catch little white crabs, and running in and out of the waves. As the sun went down and it started to get cold, I felt something move beneath my bare feet. I screamed, and some of the boys—**Michael Maisonpierre '76** and **Danny Posen '76**—made fun of me for squealing. But when I bent down to take a look, I realized it was a good sized, grown up, red crab!

We had a big discussion about how I was going to get a live crab back home. Somehow we managed it, because the crab eventually ended up in formaldehyde, on display in our science classroom—my first donation to ASL!

A couple of years later when I was in high school, a much smaller group went on a biology trip to Jersey. This time, we stayed overnight in a B&B. I roomed with **Darcy Dowd '76** and spent time with **Charles Francis '76**, who later became a naturalist himself. He was one of the 'big brains' of our year.

We spent a whole, blustery day at the zoo—it was freezing. We each had to pick an animal and write it up.

A year after my first visit to Jersey, Gerald Durrell visited ASL. My mother was jealous! He drew pictures in the original gym in what was the 'new' school on Loudoun Road.

Durrell was charming and funny, self-deprecating. He told great stories and didn't talk down to us. ■

Previous pages

- 1 Dave Sutherland
- 2 David Riva '79 with his grandmother, Marlene Dietrich
- 3 Gerald Durrell with Peter Waller

