

Pigs In Paradise

A labor of love creates a sanctuary for homeless pigs

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Wilbur. Miss Piggy. Babe. These are just three of many famous fictional pigs. Unfortunately, where fiction ends and reality begins, the sad truth is that there is often not a happy ending for pigs that are kept as pets. That is, unless you are a pig who is lucky enough to arrive at Ironwood Pig Sanctuary.

At this sanctuary, located about an hour north of Tucson, there is a small group of people who are working hard to give these pigs the love and care that they deserve.

From the ground up

Ironwood Pig Sanctuary was founded, in June of 2001, by the husband and wife team of Mary Schanz and Ben Watkins. Their love of pigs began in 1998 when they started volunteering at another pig sanctuary. By 2000, that sanctuary had started to outgrow its available space. That fall, the couple purchased 40 acres near Marana, Arizona, to start their own sanctuary. With the arrival of Claire and Popeye on June 10, 2001, Ironwood Pig Sanctuary was officially opened for business. By the end of that first month, the initial eight pens were already full.

Ironwood is a labor of love in both the literal and figurative sense. The 40 acres that were purchased were raw land. There were no sewer or water lines. The nearest power line was over a mile away. Many hours have been spent working, under the hot Arizona sun, to get trenches dug for water lines and to make sure shade shelters were available for the pigs. Generators provided power up until 2008 and even now, during the warm summer months, two water trucks haul water several times a week where 53,000 gallons of water are stored on site, in addition to a well from

which 2,000 gallons are pumped daily.

The sanctuary has grown substantially since the arrival of Claire and Popeye. In addition to the main sanctuary, there are two satellite locations.

In 2003, Mary and Ben purchased the property where they began their volunteer journey. Facing foreclosure, this land purchase would keep the 85 pigs that lived there safe. In 2004, Mary and Ben came to the rescue of another pig sanctuary. All together, the three locations provide care for approximately 585 pigs, one goat and one chicken.



Different species, same problems

Like cats and dogs, pigs are surrendered for many of the same reasons: moving, divorce, guardian illness/death, behavior issues. Many are found as strays. Additionally, many communities classify pigs as livestock and they cannot be kept as pets. This makes it even more difficult to find a home for a pig that a guardian cannot, or does not, want to care for any longer. Unfortunately, as much as they would like to, Ironwood is not able to help all

the pigs for which they receive calls and they do maintain a waiting list. On average, the sanctuary receives one to two calls per week for assistance. Often, these requests involve multiple pigs.

“Occasionally, we go for a couple weeks without a call and other times we get one or two calls per day,” according to Mary. “Sometimes, we just have to tell people we can’t take their pig. We try to do triage. We take the strays, those in immediate danger or in a bad abuse situation, and most often when people are going through a foreclosure. We often don’t take them just because they don’t want them anymore. We try to work with their problem, if possible.”

Life at Ironwood

By nature, pigs are herd animals and integrating new pigs to sanctuary life can be challenging. It can often be weeks or months before everyone finds their place in the herd. Of the 90 acres that Ben and Mary have, 21 belong to the sanctuary. This acreage is divided into 22 different fields, 32 pens and an additional large pen that houses those pigs who are very disabled. When asked how it is determined to which area a pig will go, Mary says, “The size varies depending on the ability of the pigs. They are grouped according to how old they are, how well they can get around, what their personality is like and where they came from.”

To help those pigs who are unable to live in the main fields, Ironwood has an assisted living area. Most of the pigs here have medical issues that require additional care. There are approximately 70-80 pigs in these six fields and according to Mary, the most common reason for a pig to be here is due to their age and arthritis. Additionally, younger pigs often find themselves in this field if they come in with a condition known as fat blindness. This occurs when folds of fat impair their ability to see. Obese pigs are also unable to handle the fights that break out over hierarchy.

With so many pigs to care for, a typical day at Ironwood is anything but typical. The sanctuary currently has five staff members and depending on the season, their day could start as early as 4 a.m. Medications take two to three hours to

prepare and dispense. In addition to feedings, pools have to be scrubbed and wallows filled. Hay is spread for the pigs to graze, waste needs to be raked and shelters need to be repaired. When temperatures heat up, shade armadas are built. In winter, carpets are hung on shelters and blankets are brought out.

Some days will also involve medical appointments. In the past, all males were neutered. Mary indicates there were no exceptions to this. Spaying females was more challenging due to no available options. However, in partnership with the Humane Society of Southern Arizona and their regular vet opening her own clinic, Ironwood was able to start spaying females on a regular basis.

“We found out, over the years, that 80-85 percent of all unspayed females will develop uterine tumors if they are not spayed,” says Mary. To prevent premature death, Ironwood spays as many of their females that they can. All adopted pigs are spayed, as well as young pigs since recovery is generally easier for them.

Challenges

Based on her experiences, it probably would not come as a surprise that Mary is not an advocate of pigs as pets.

“While I know there are many good homes where people really love their pig or pigs, I would say they are a small percentage of all the pigs that end up in homes,” says Mary.

She has found that people generally do not know proper pig care. Shelters are not expanded as the pig grows. Proper nutrition and hoof care are often ignored. In the past, Ironwood has done as many as 50 adoptions in a year. Last year, they only did eight. Adoption requests have dropped and most people want a baby. New arrivals to Ironwood tend to be victims of foreclosure and older. Currently, adoptions are generally done in pairs. Since single pigs can become aggressive if left alone, single pigs are adopted out only if they have always been on their own.

When asked about the challenges of running a

sanctuary, Mary says she could write a book. However, the biggest is money. It is also difficult to find good staff that are willing to work hard for low pay. There is also the emotional side of sanctuary life.

“Dealing with the emotional and physical demands of working all the time, having to deal with having your dear friends die or become ill and the constant calls coming in to take pigs in when you know you have reached your limit but know that there is no option for this poor animal,” Mary says. “It never ends.”

However, you can help! A fun way to help the sanctuary is through their sponsor a pig program. A \$30 monthly donation will cover all of your sponsored pig’s needs. It is an easy way to help make a difference in the lives of these special animals.

The sanctuary is open for tours, by appointment. In general, tours take place on Saturday mornings. Times do vary based on the season and tours are generally not available during the warmest summer months. It is best to contact the sanctuary by email to schedule.

From early beginnings as volunteers to now running their own facility, Mary Schanz and Ben Watkins have dedicated their lives to helping these wonderful animals.

As Mary notes, “My life at Ironwood is very busy and often stressful, but when I am away from the sanctuary, for any reason, when I return I can’t wait to visit every area to reconnect with all the pigs, for they have become my family.” With such love and devotion, there is probably no better place for these pigs to call home.