



# The woman who loved baby animals

EILEEN MAHAN WORKS AT THE ZOO—AND OPENS HER HEART AND HOME TO BABY KANGAROOS, BINTURONGS AND POTBELLIED PIGS

by John Sedgwick

Eileen Mahan shows off her all-time favorite charge, a binturong named Ralph.

Eileen Mahan is a wonderful mother, but her kids are a little wild. They swing from the chandeliers, keep her up all night and go to the bathroom in her sneakers. But that's to be expected, since her children are young exotic animals—among others, a potbellied pig, a zebra, a mongoose lemur and her all-time favorite, a binturong named Ralph.

Officially a laboratory technician at the Philadelphia Zoo, Mahan doubles as the zoo's foster parent, caring for animals abandoned at birth by their real mothers. "I'm the mothering type," says Mahan, twenty-seven. "When I'm around animals, I just want to give them a hug." Two years ago, when the zoo's Indian rhino, Xavira, gave birth, Mahan strapped on a plastic rhino snout and watched the TV monitor showing the delivery. "I was a cheerleader in grade school," she says, "and I guess my training came out. I was screaming, 'Push! P-U-S-H! Push!'" When the baby—only the ninth Indian rhino born in American zoos—finally emerged, Mahan burst into tears and rushed to the phone to call her parents. "It's a boy!" she exclaimed.

In calmer moments at the zoo, Mahan can usually be found on her stool in the lab, examining blood samples under her microscope. The animals she is raising keep her company at work—if they stay quiet. The binturong, Ralph, who looked like an elongated kitten, usually sat on her shoulder, his tail curled affectionately about her neck. A tiny primate called a Geoffrey's marmoset preferred to cling to her hair. And a little kangaroo named Eddie occupied an L.L. Bean bag hanging from a hook by her bulletin board. The others, who were too jittery, she left at the zoo nursery during the day, and took home with her at night.

One might ask why Mahan does it. "The work's very fulfilling," she says. "When I get

the animals, they've been rejected by their mothers, and they're usually ill, cold and dirty. If I do my job right, I can make things better for them. That's a great feeling."

Mahan has been drawn to animals since she was a toddler. On family vacations in the Poconos, she used to pester her parents to take her to a local petting zoo as often as twice a day. Back home in the Philadelphia suburb of Drexel Hill, she would beg to be driven to a nearby duck pond every week for a Sunday morning feeding. By high school, she knew she wanted to make a career out of working with animals. After graduation, she earned an associate's degree in veterinary technology at Harcum Junior College and completed an internship program at the University of Pennsylvania, specializing in exotic wildlife. The internship led to the job at the Philadelphia Zoo.

Mahan develops intense emotional involvement with all the animals she handraises, but Ralph, the binturong, was the love of her life. He stole her heart in the summer of 1985—before she'd met her future husband—and even today she gets a little teary when she thinks about him.

Commonly called bear cats, binturongs are slinky, catlike creatures with coarse, dark fur and long, curving prehensile tails. In truth, Mahan was not smitten with Ralph right away. She'd never found binturongs particularly appealing, and Ralph was a whiner. "What a big mouth," Mahan remembers thinking. "He cried and screamed constantly." She named him Ralph, in fact, after Ralph Kramden of *The Honeymooners*. Ralph's sister, whom Mahan named Alice, had also been abandoned by the mother binturong. "Alice was so docile and sweet," says Mahan. "She'd sit on my lap all the time. It was Ralph who was a pain."

Two weeks after Mahan (Continued)



## ZOO MOM

Continued

brought the two binturongs home, Alice was sold to the Cincinnati Zoo and became the mascot of the University of Cincinnati Bearcats football team. Worried that Ralph would withdraw even more now that his sister was gone, Mahan gave him a teddy bear to play with. To her surprise, Ralph wanted *her*: "I guess that once he didn't have another binturong to relate to, he moved on to the next best thing, and that was me." He moved onto Mahan literally, taking up residence on her shoulder, holding on as she walked by slinging his tail around her neck.

The two went everywhere together, indoors and out. At work, Ralph had the run of the lab and was soon adopted as mascot by the rest of the staff. "He was always very curious," Mahan says. "He liked to look in my microscope, and if anybody new came into the lab, Ralph would run over to smell the person's shoes to see where he'd been." But at the first sign of trouble, the binturong would come running back, bound onto Mahan's lap and up to her shoulder. Looping his tail around her neck for security, he'd lap affectionately at the mascara on her outer eyelashes, giving her what she calls "a very punk look."

Ralph always stayed close by when they strolled around the zoo, but she put him on a leash when they went for walks out in the suburbs. When they went for a

drive, Ralph occasionally ventured from her shoulder onto the steering wheel. At night, he, her dog Roxanne and Mahan slept together on her narrow twin bed. Roxanne took the foot on one side, Ralph the head on the other, and Mahan had whatever space was left down the middle.

Ralph's only flaw was his table manners. After he was weaned from the bottle, he ate a mixture of oatmeal and bananas that Mahan set out for him. Every morning as the bowl touched the floor, he would dive in headfirst, then emerge with a snort, licking at the oatmeal that dribbled down his face. "It was like *Animal House*," Mahan laughs.

As Ralph grew, though, Mahan had an increasingly difficult time with him. At three months, he was starting to turn into a binturong. For one thing, he was climbing more. Mahan would sometimes find him dangling from the chandelier or swinging around on the TV antenna. He was also developing a noticeable scent, a secretion of the anal glands that binturongs use to mark their territory; the whole house began to smell faintly of buttered popcorn. Then his nocturnal behavior kicked in: Instead of sleeping quietly beside Mahan, he'd wake up at three or four in the morning, rouse her by licking at her eyes, and want to play.

Like his sister Alice, Ralph had been up for sale from birth, since there was no

more space for binturongs at the zoo. Mahan considered buying him, but knew permanent ownership would be problematic. She would want to have him descended, but the procedure had not yet been developed for binturongs. Also, she had no place to keep him. Although she dreamed of one day having an "animal-proof" spare room for her pets, she couldn't afford a larger home.

After three months, a buyer was found, and two keepers from the Bronx Zoo came to take Ralph to his new home at its Children's Zoo. Fighting back tears, Mahan sliced up some apples and bananas for him to nibble on during the ride. Since she knew he'd cry if he was cooped up all alone in his crate, she tucked in his teddy bear, although it was, strictly speaking, zoo property. His new keepers told her they felt as if they were from the orphanage, coming to take her kid away. Mahan assured them it was okay. She put Ralph in his crate for the last time, carried it out to the car and tearfully waved good-bye, until the car was out of sight.

With Ralph gone, Mahan suddenly felt very alone. Because of her round-the-clock occupation, "I never had time for a social life," she says. "Guys would call, but I'd say, 'I'm sorry, I can't go out tonight because an Indian rhino is giving birth,' and they'd say, 'Gee, that's pretty lame.' Or I'd tell them I could only go to a short

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
movie because I had to get back to feed the Geoffrey's marmoset. That didn't go over big either. But my feeling was, if a guy can't accept that, then I can't accept him. This is my life."

After Ralph left, she felt all her friends were in great relationships, and she had nobody. Because her zoo salary is so low, she was also in debt. So she decided to move back in with her parents. "They're saints," she says. When Mahan called one day to say she'd be bringing a baby zebra home, they simply said, "Fine. See you in a few minutes." On a hall table beside the formal family portraits stands a photo of Mahan and Ralph, displayed just as proudly.

A few weeks after Ralph's departure, Mahan was given a baby kangaroo to raise. Eddie was nearly as affectionate as Ralph. When she bent down to pick him up, he'd hug her arm and jump up and down ecstatically. That helped ease the loss of her favorite, but her mood didn't fully lift until she went to visit Ralph two months later. She was distressed to see that his name had been changed "to something from *Star Wars*—I don't remember what." But Ralph was still Ralph. The keepers let her hold him, and he immediately climbed onto her shoulder and set to work licking her mascara, just as he always had. Mahan was pleased he hadn't forgotten her, but it was also clear that Ralph had adjusted and was doing well in his new home. "I figured if Ralph could make it, I could, too."

She has since moved on to other affections with a potbellied pig, a chamois, a leaf-nosed bat and most important of all, a man named Will Mahan, whom she married in April. Typically, Eileen was pet-sitting for a friend at the time of their first date. To her amazement, Will was wonderfully understanding about her animals right from the beginning (although he did note that the leaf-nosed bat "was not a creature you could fall in love with"). "It takes a lot of sacrifices to do what she does," says Will, a prefabricated-housing salesman. "I don't get jealous. I know how much it means to her."

The couple now lives in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, about an hour from Philadelphia. Eileen hopes to have children and figures that, after all her practice with bottles and nighttime feedings, caring for an infant will be a snap. If she ever left the zoo, where she has occupied not only the same job, but the same chair for seven years, she would start her own business selling doll furniture.

But leaving the zoo would never mean forgetting her animals. Mahan still visits Ralph and always asks colleagues who are going to the Bronx Zoo to check on him for her. She even dreams about him. In one dream, she and Ralph were in a convertible headed to Florida. "It was great," she says. "We were having a wonderful time." 

John Sedgwick wrote a book about the Philadelphia Zoo called *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Year with America's Oldest Zoo*, published by William Morrow and Company.



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