

A Very Special Delivery

BY BRIANNA MCCLANE

FRONT ROYAL, VA. — **Copper Aitken-Palmer** was only a month into her new job when she made the front page of *The Washington Post*. After performing an emergency cesarean section on a cheetah, Aitken-Palmer delivered the two baby cheetahs featured in a Page One photo on May 23. Sadly, two other cubs were lost during the procedure.

“It’s a tough pill to swallow that we lost two,” the 34-year-old veterinarian says. “You always push yourself, you want to do better, you want to do more, and so for me, everyone gives me a pat on the back for the two that survived, but it’s tough for me, too, that two didn’t.”

Many kids love animals and dream of becoming a veterinarian, but the career path is usually forgotten by the time college rolls around. Aitken-Palmer was the little girl who dragged around Volume A of the encyclopedia because it contained the animals. The Kansas City, Mo., native would proclaim she was going to work with giant pandas, a statement her mom would laugh off. “I don’t ever remember wanting to be anything but a vet,” Aitken-Palmer says.

Aitken-Palmer’s ambition is evident. After graduating from Eckerd College, she began the process of applying to veterinary schools. Conscious of the difficulty of being accepted, she e-mailed authors of papers she found interesting to inquire about summer opportunities and graduate programs. One of those e-mails went to David Wildt, senior scientist and head of the Center for Species Survival at the National Zoological Park.

“He didn’t respond for five months, so I figured that he wasn’t going to,” Aitken-Palmer says. And when he did respond, Aitken-Palmer had been accepted at Kansas State University’s College of Veterinary Medicine. But Wildt offered her the opportunity to spend her summers at the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute in Front Royal, Va.

“I did very unglamorous work. I didn’t work with animals at all,” she says. “I cleaned freezers, worked in the hormone lab, worked with poop.”

Her work at Front Royal allowed her to simultaneously obtain her master’s degree through a collaboration between Kansas State and the Smithsonian. After graduation, Aitken-Palmer was offered a chance to study giant-panda reproduction at the University of Maryland (College Park) for her doctorate. So the little girl who declared she would one day work with giant pandas spent about three months a year for



Aitken-Palmer: Delivered cheetah cubs (below).



four years studying the animal in China.

That same little girl grew up to also work with animals in South Africa, Vietnam, Scotland, and Thailand. When asked if she would have imagined when she was growing up that she would one day work in Asia, she says, “No way. I mean, no way, right?”

“I’m an example that if you want it bad enough and you work for it, and maybe accept some sacrifices to make it happen, you can make it happen,” she says.

Aitken-Palmer’s work and studies have taken her all over the country. A homecoming occurred three months ago, though, when she rejoined the Smithsonian as the veterinarian at the Front Royal campus.

“This is a dream job,” she says. “If you had told me 10 years ago when I was out here cleaning freezers that in 10 years I would be the vet, I would have said, ‘Oh stop joking, that’s too good to be true.’ I’m thrilled to be here.”

Of course, Aitken-Palmer’s position isn’t

only delivering cubs. As the sole veterinarian on the 3,500-acre Front Royal campus, her day can consist of reading medical records, observing animals from afar, and talking to the nutritionist. Some days can even consist of giving a white rhinoceros an enema.

“There are a lot of parts to the job that aren’t fun. It’s definitely a dirty job,” she says. “Everyone thinks it’s like *National Geographic* all day, every day, but it’s not.”

That’s not to say she doesn’t enjoy the time spent with animals. It’s difficult to imagine petite Aitken-Palmer giving a white rhinoceros an enema, but she promises it’s easy. She compares them to big dogs and says one of the biggest surprises she’s encountered in her position is how an animal so big and potentially dangerous is trainable.

“It never gets old, seeing a 2,000-pound animal trotting over because it’s excited to see you,” she says.

The white rhinoceros may be an easy patient, but it’s the cheetah that she would choose if she could only work with one animal for the rest of her career. Cheetahs present unique health challenges for veterinarians that keep her work interesting. It’s fitting that her first major surgery at Front Royal was on the animal. And as for the births that put her name on the front page?

“It’s a high point that’s going to be tough to beat,” she says.

Both cubs were healthy and active at their last checkup on Thursday. They are expected to make their public debut later this summer at the National Zoo’s Cheetah Conservation Station. ■