

Sarez Bengals... the Cats That Bewitch the Stars

By C. Esmond Gay - Sarez Bengals - 2004

Just eleven years ago I could never have dreamt that a unique spotted cat would change the lives of Sarah and me, shining the media spotlight on us, and giving our previously bland existence so much pleasure and exhilaration. Our cats have brought comfort and joy to us both... and they've given us something else that we will always cherish; they've made us many new friends - kind and sincere people. Most are very ordinary, just like us - but a few of them happen to be some of the most successful and well-known individuals in the world. And with all of them, we will forever share a common bond - a mutual love of the beautiful Bengal cat.

My main passion in life has always been for true wild cats - my fantasy animals. Nature has bestowed so much upon these exotic creatures; astonishing beauty, independent characters and souls that are full of fire... but for most, they are unattainable - an impossible dream.



Sarez Secret Recipie (F2 Female) - Circa March 1997

However, in 1993 my fiancée, Sarah, and I saw our first real life Bengal - a magnificent creature sprawled over a friend's sofa - we were mesmerised! His coat was the purest gold, his spots were as black as night and he shimmered as the light

danced upon his body. This wasn't just a cat - *this was the epitome of feline perfection!* A domestic and wild cat mix that resembled a leopard, but that required no license - what a compromise! *A little part of nature, for people such as us!*

We were hooked - but I knew that I'd never be satisfied with just one as I had always craved a home full of cats, and so from that day on, my heart constantly whispered to my head: *"what better type than one that emulates the beauty of the wild?"*

These animals were expensive though, and Sarah and I had little money - we knew we would have to come up with a very good idea if our dreams were to be fulfilled. And after much thought and discussion, eventually we did - we chose the only route that would enable us to live with all the Bengals we desired... *we became breeders!*

I'm a very driven person and so within two years Sarah and I owned a huge collection comprising of some of the best Bengals in existence; we had all the colours and all the generations including three of just four rare Filial 1 (F1) Bengal x leopard cat hybrids in Britain, and we had some superb late generation (SBT) studs and females, funding their purchase by selling their babies. *My once idle obsession had turned us into one of the world's largest and most significant breeders of these cats!*



Esmond Gay & Sarex Bengal Kittens - 30th April 1996

And we've never regretted our decision; to this day, living with these cats is heaven! Bengals have inherited so many amazing abilities from their recent wild ancestors... relentless amounts of energy keeps these little dynamos dashing around our home, never seeming to tire during their manic games of prowling and stalking! *Such exuberance for life!* They're also more intelligent than other domestic cats, enabling them to interact better

LATEST IN EXOTIC FELINES GET THEIR CLAWS INTO BRITAIN

The Leopocat

By BILL MOULAND
THE face is like many an alley cat's.
It is only when the animal shows off its fancy spotted body that it is revealed as a new and exotic breed for Britain. Introducing the Bengal, a cross between the wild leopard cat that stalks Central Asia and the cream of English feline society. In America, they are all the rage since they were first bred in the 1960s in an attempt to create the ideal big cat pet for the clothing industry on the grounds that women would be dissuaded from wearing furs that looked like their friends' cats. There are now an estimated 3,000 Bengals in the U.S. and the breed is taking off in Britain. In a village near High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, more than a dozen leopard-like Bengal kittens perched around Esmond Gay's semi-detached home. On the open market, he could sell them for £600. But they are not for sale. 'The cats are a therapeutic hobby, rather than a money-making business,' he said. Unlike their country cousins, they prowl rather than stalk and like nothing better than snatching around in the bath. One was caught

On the wild side: An adult Bengal belonging to Esmond Gay shows off its spots. The breed prowls rather than stalks and loves a dip in the bath. Below, a Bengal kitten. He's not for sale at any price, says Mr. Gay. PHOTOS: MARK RICHARDS

PRICELESS KITTENS THAT KNOCK SPOTS OFF THE REST

taking a dip in a neighbour's swimming pool. The cats are not for the faint-hearted. Although they hardly eat from a tin, just like Arthur in the TV advert, they like nothing better than a day-old fresh chick to lose in the air as they would in the wild. 'We don't have any mice round here, but I can assure they would catch them,' said Mr. Gay. 'It's also best to take them out for walks on the lead because they are so reliable.' 'They are a fantastic cat, and because they are so rare and special breeding them could become big business here. I worry that unscrupulous breeders could get greedy and try to produce too many kittens from one mother to cash in. The breed will take flight with people I think will want them for the wrong reasons, such as their own health or for a plaything for children. I was offered £5,000 for an adult cat but wouldn't sell.'

Sarex Bengals - Daily Mail - 30th August 1994

with humans - they can even sense one's moods... whenever biting depression strikes me, my babies smother me with their silken bodies and purr comfortably in my ear, and I hear: *"Daddy, we're here for you. Everything will be alright. We love you and that's forever..."*

Sarah and I didn't expect anyone from outside the cat fancy to notice what we were doing as publicity hadn't been on our agenda. We'd not gone out of our way to broadcast ourselves and so when the media started to follow our work, we were surprised. And we certainly had no idea of where it would lead... *or who it would later bring knocking at our door.*

It began all on the 30th August 1994; one minute we lived in total obscurity and the next we found ourselves emblazoned over the pages of one of Britain's largest national newspapers, the **Daily Mail**.

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In the early years, the publicity was about our cats and the Bengal breed, their uniquely-wild heritage intriguing the media in a way that no other pedigree cat had before. However, after a while it expanded and became about Sarah and me as well. The press soon realised that I don't conform to the stereotypical British cat breeder - I broke the mould... I'm controversial, outspoken and totally unafraid to go head to head against even the cat fancy establishments themselves. *I do what I believe to be right for my cats and for the breed* - a stance that angers those with more antiquated mindsets, but my approach is also refreshing and modern to others. The press certainly liked it.

And they seemed to like my eccentric character as well, and my devotion to my animals. Some reporters later told me that when I speak about my pets, I become deeply emotional and “talk from my heart”. They said that my “passion shines through” and that my descriptions of my life with this breed are “inspirational”. I replied that it’s *my cats* that fire my passion, and that it is *they* that inspire me! And through the media, I told the world that my cats are “my children” and that I’d give up anything for them, and had even left them all my money in my will. The press claimed that my special kinship with my pets is

unusual for a young man - perhaps so, but I explained that my animals don't persecute nor hurt me as humans have... and I described some of the traumatic childhood events that caused me bond so closely with them. Some breeders ridiculed my words, but I didn't care... I felt proud that I have the capacity to love these creatures so deeply.

And sadly that wasn't all that some of the rival British breeders said about me. They seemed to feel the exact opposite of how the press felt, and despised my rather unconventional character; to them, I was an upstart who had entered their close-knit world and dominated it (I hadn't intended to). And some of them ensured that I suffered for it; they made up rumours and lies, and, taking full advantage of my very apparent sensitive nature, they sometimes even pushed me to tears.

However, when investigative reporter Jonathan Margolis heard what was happening, he smelt injustice... and a juicy, sensational story that had all the ingredients needed for tabloid success. And so, on the 25th of August 1996, a **5,000 word front page cover story** was printed in *The Mail on Sunday*, entitled "**Fur and Loathing**". It contained interviews with many of our high profile clients, giving them a public voice with which to air their good opinions of us and our cats. But the reporter was fair and devoted just as much column space to our critics... allowing *their own words* to betray what really drove them in this vendetta; *envy*. All in all, this was an astonishing feature - I've rarely seen so many pages (five) dedicated to one

subject, let alone to us and our cats! And seeing my face covering the front page *and* two inside pages was both amusing and shocking! And ironically, this feature did what our rivals had least wanted... *it made our cats even more popular!*

Over the following years, the publicity continued at a steady pace with appearances in national newspapers, cat magazines, local papers, documentaries, nature programmes and news features. Worldwide media companies filmed or wrote about us and our cats, ranging from French TV producers, Chinese newspapers, to obscure publications from tiny countries that we'd barely heard of. Some publications even bestowed nicknames upon me, ranging from "*the Cat Man*" to "*Dr. Doolittle*" (both of which I rather like).

And so the snowball effect gathered momentum... and intensified!



Esmond Gay - Cover of The Mail on Sunday - 25th August 1996

Then, in 2000, Sarah and I became the first breeders in Britain to hybridise from leopard cats; first Sarez Little L. - and then astonishingly from a second named Sarez Apollo, both producing many rare F1 Bengals. Few others in the world have ever succeeded at such an endeavour, making it very newsworthy indeed.

And in 2003, we achieved another extraordinary feat by breeding a 90% wild blood F1 named *Sarez Zeus*. This breathtaking cat had cost us a fortune to breed, and due to this and him being a one-off, he commanded a price tag of £100,000. We had intended to keep this confidential, but in the summer of that year, the press found out and proclaimed him to be the ***world's most expensive cat***. And within days, our home was besieged by five huge satellite TV vans parked outside our gates, all of which refused to leave until they had interviews. The neighbours were not too pleased...



Sarez Zeus (& Sarah) - Two Pages (+ Front Page) in the Daily Mail - 25th August 2003

Eventually we relented and by the time the press were gratified, *Zeus* had starred on 7 British TV channels and many more worldwide (in 35 different countries), and in almost every one of the UK's national newspapers, as well as innumerable magazines. The most overwhelming was a vast two page centre feature (and part of the front page) in the ***Daily Mail*** with a magnificent life-size photo of *Zeus* posing on our chaise longue. And other newspaper articles were almost as colossal. But my most surreal memory of this episode concerned a smaller one; I was in a newsagent nonchalantly flicking through a copy of ***Hello!*** magazine and as I turned the page expecting to see some royal or celebrity, my fiancée's face beamed back at me from a large feature! It was a shock as she hadn't been formerly interviewed nor did we know anything was going to appear!

However, the most important thing about this event was the cat himself - this high wild blood F1 was picked up, held by strangers, passed around, chased, played with, filmed and photographed almost continuously for several weeks... *and he remained calm, gentle and sweet throughout*. His charming character was commented on in all the articles and on TV. *Zeus* showed the world that *all* Bengals are docile when they've been well brought up.

From 1994 to the present, millions of people worldwide have seen our Bengals on about **35 TV programmes and in over 100 newspapers and magazines** (some of which are on the internet). And all this publicity has certainly created many new Bengal admirers, something that benefits *all* breeders. As for us, well, our cats have introduced us to some amazing people from all parts of society; from everyday people (who make up most of our clientele), to cat lovers who can't afford a pedigree cat (to whom we sometimes give kittens away free of charge), to the landed gentry such as Lady Miranda Rothschild (from the famous banking family), to the super-rich such as Louis Bacon (multi-billionaire hedge fund manager), as well as to a dazzling list of TV stars.

And Sarah and I endeavour to forge lifelong friendships with all of them... including our better known clients. ***Here are some of our stories;***

Esther Rantzen

I have always admired Esther Rantzen, not because she's a TV celebrity, but more for her work with ***Childline***. This charity is very close to my heart due to the problems that I had whilst growing up, and I thought it wonderful that she's doing something so constructive for abused children.



**Esmond Gay (with Leopardette) & Esther Rantzen -
28th April 1995**

On the 28th of April 1995, Sarah and I were invited to be on her chat show called ***"Esther"*** for a programme aptly entitled ***"Potty About Pets"***, and so we took along *Boo Boo*, our Birman and *Leopardette* (*Nyali Jungle Song*), one of our ultra-friendly F1 Bengal females.

The filming was certainly a lively event! At one point Esther interviewed a young man who had the audacity to condemn his two cats, insinuating that they were pointless and served no real purpose. She then crossed over the studio to me, probably knowing from her researchers that the man's words would infuriate me, and indeed they did. I stood up, ignored the presenter, and glared at the man, going red as I strived to control my anger; and then I scolded him as firmly as one can on live TV, telling him that if he didn't like cats, then he shouldn't keep them! I even surprised myself as normally I am so docile and gentle! But Esther calmed me

and encouraged me to explain why I feel that cats are special, and what ours do for me.

Then one of our photos flashed up on the studio monitors, showing several litters of our kittens perched precariously on our beautiful pine dresser, amongst a £5,000 Wedgewood dinner service. This was *not* a posed image, but it did portray the typical mischief that numerous cats get up to when living together! I had walked into the kitchen one evening and there they were, one kitten having copied another until they were all lined up in a row.

But to onlookers who didn't own either the dresser or the dinner service, the most amusing part was when our cats' boisterous play brought the whole thing crashing to the ground, smashing the dresser and every plate, cup and saucer! "*Didn't you mind?*" asked Esther. "*Well... no... the new dinner service is sitting safely in our bathroom waiting to be bluetacked down to the repaired dresser*", I replied. One gets used to these sort of events when one shares one's home with so many cats - but our normality seemed to be extraordinary to everyone else as this photo and the accident that happened soon after, was brought up on other TV programmes and magazines that we appeared in around the same time.



SBT Sarez Bengal Kittens - Circa August 1994

After the show, Esther came to our dressing room and, as ever-gentle *Leopardette* lay calmly in my arms, she and I chatted about Childline and then had our photos taken.

After this, I realised that stars are not scary or aloof - in fact, they're just like us!

Lord and Lady Nourse, the Lord Justice of Appeal

Sometimes when fellow cat addicts first meet, the bond is instantaneous. Lord Nourse is the highest judge in Britain, yet his wife is one of the most approachable ladies I have ever met. On the day they came to our house in 1995, Lady Lavinia Nourse and I chatted about cats for hours, and having been thoroughly covered in Bengals throughout, she eventually chose a brown spotted SBT kitten who she named *Tippoo* (*Sarez Lord Fonterloroy*).

Lady Nourse is kind and caring and she hated the persecution that she soon witnessed against Sarah and me within the Bengal fancy, and as the proud owner of one of our kittens, she became a very vocal and active supporter of ours. This normally private lady

helped us with our Bengal club (the F.B.C.C.) and, amongst others, readily volunteered to be interviewed for *The Mail on Sunday's* "Fur and Loathing" article in 1996. I'll always feel close to her for how fiercely she supported us. Some breeders publicly mocked her for her loyalty, but she stood true to her own impressions of us.

On one of her many visits to us, one image that always makes me smile is of Lady Nourse sitting on our living room floor, playing with our tame F1 male, *Occie* - he loved being passionately stroked by her and responded by suckling her fingers and scratching at the soles of her shoes - a favourite pastime of F1s. And, with no care for her expensive designer clothes, he'd stalk her and then pounce on her, causing her to cry out in both surprise and amusement. She was smitten, as was he! *Occie's* generation is as close to the wild that a Bengal can get and normally they only go to one person and avoid strangers - but his "mum", Sarah, had told him that Lady Nourse was safe and he trusted her word.



Lady Lavinia Nourse & Occie (F1 Male) - Circa Spring 1997

Tippoo has the run of their huge park-like estate, frolics in the undergrowth and climbs their trees, fully believing that he's a true wild leopard! He swims in their pond, catches fish and puts them at Lady Nourse's feet, probably in the hope that they will be eaten by the household at dinner. *Tippo* also helps to entertain their guests at events and parties - and at one, he met a famous author and convinced him that Bengals indeed make wonderful pets.

And so not long after, that gentleman also paid a visit to our small village...

Lord Jeffrey Archer

Politician and author Lord Archer has been one of my idols since I travelled Malaysia with my sister in the summer of 1988 (just weeks before I met Sarah). I read one of his books, *Kane and Able*, on my trip and found it inspirational, but I never dreamt that this gentleman would ever grace our home!

Lady Nourse brought Lord and Lady Archer to visit us in May 1996, and when I peeked through our living room door and saw the acclaimed writer sitting on our sofa, I was completely awe-struck! I stood with Sarah in the kitchen for a few moments, too frightened to go in and meet him, but ever calm, my fiancée spoke to me gently and finally persuaded me. And so, trembling slightly, I entered and introduced myself, returning his vigorous handshake, and as Lord Archer and his wife, Mary, spoke to me reassuringly, I relaxed and wondered what had I feared?

One lingering memory that's stuck in my mind is of Lord Archer standing on top of one of our brand new and quite expensive inlaid mahogany dining room chairs; as he stretched out precariously to reach up to the top of our 8 foot high fish tank so that he could peer at the kittens perched on top, *a loud crack rang out as the chair split!* I'm not sure who was more surprised; me, the kittens or Lord Archer! Not knowing whether to laugh or cry, I said nothing, but silently cursed the Freeads paper whence the dining suite had come!

I then showed him *Ondine*, our beautiful hand-reared, female ocelot. I told Lord Archer of the plight that the relatives of the Bengal face in the wild, and I explained that I felt cold when I contemplated the 200,000 ocelot pelts that used to be imported into America *each year*, just to fulfil the desires of the fashion industry. Since obtaining *Ondine*, I had found it so difficult to relax as I stroked her because every time I ran my hands down her silken coat, my mind was flooded with images of the millions of her kind that had been trapped and suffered agonising deaths for the sake of the fur trade. Such thoughts often had me in tears when I was around her, and I think that my deep love for *Ondine* was one of the factors that nudged me into helping to conserve wild cats. It took me 2 years before I was strong enough to control those images and push them from my mind when I was with her.

But I didn't think people such as Lord Archer would be fazed by such things, and so I was startled when I saw his face fall as he listened to my words and watched *Ondine* prowling around her luxury enclosure; I think it dawned on him that he was looking at one of the most persecuted wild cats on earth. I was proud that I was in a position to bring the wild cat cause to influential figures as Lord Archer - people



Esmond Gay (& Sarez Sitah & Tito) & Lord & Lady Archer - 19th August 1996

who have the money and the power to make a considerable difference to them, if they so wish. Then I told him about our own efforts to help them in our ***Sarez Wild Cat Conservation Programme***, and how it's all funded through the sale of our Bengal kittens. This was a fledgling project in 1996, but one that would soon grow to include other ***ocelots, African leopards, servals*** and the more threatened subspecies of ***leopard cat***.

The Archers chose two male SBTs, a brown marble and brown spotted, and befitting their amusing characters, they named them *Laurel* and *Hardy* (*Sarez Sitah* and *Sarez Tito*). Both kittens are treasured members of the Archer's home.

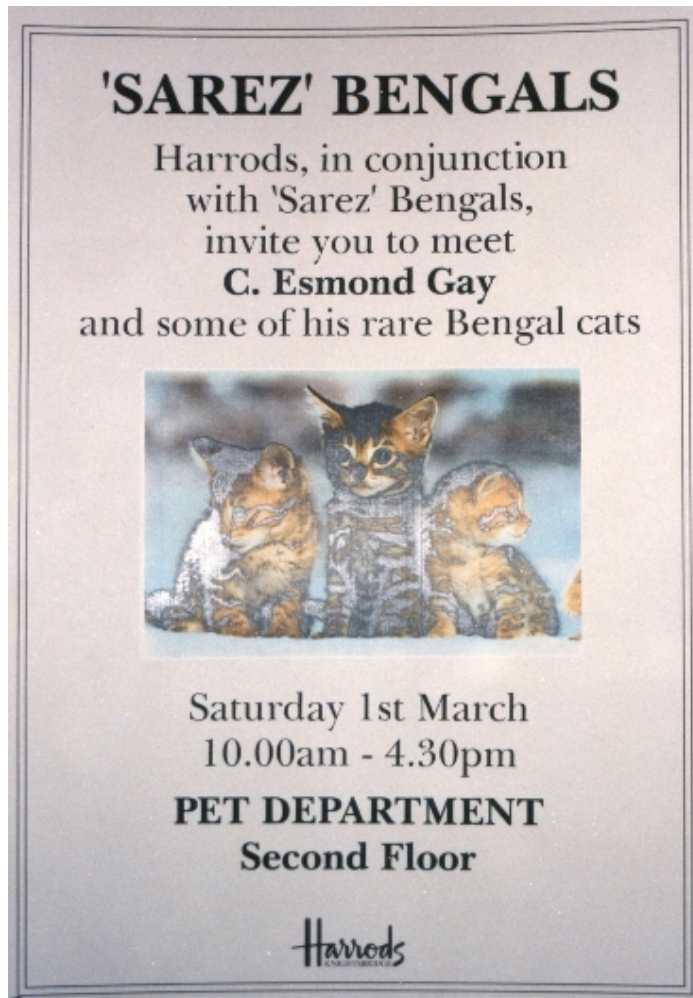
And thanks to the Bengal, the Archers are more enlightened about feline conservation.

His Majesty the Sultan of Brunei

After Lord and Lady Archer's kittens and some of our other cats appeared in a large article in *The Daily Telegraph* in August 1996, His Majesty the Sultan of Brunei sent a representative to our home to choose some kittens. She was a sweet, demure Malaysian lady and after a chat, she picked a scarce F2 brown spotted Bengal (two generations from the leopard cat) and marble and snow spotted SBTs. I envied the luxury life that these kittens would lead within the Sultan's 240 roomed palace in Brunei!

At this time, some breeders condemned the wealthy who were buying our kittens, saying that such people "won't love them" and will "get bored" of their pets. *How judgemental and shallow!* Having money and being well known doesn't mean that one doesn't have a heart, nor does it stop a person from loving and caring for other living creatures!

Harrods of Knightsbridge



Harrods Poster with Sarez Bengals - 1st March 1997

After another article in *The Daily Telegraph* about the Sultan of Brunei's kittens, his friend Mohamed Al Fayed approached us and asked Sarah and I to *show* our Bengals exclusively at Harrods. And so on the 19th of September 1996 we made the first of several trips to his renowned department store, taking some of our F2 and SBT kittens with us. And whilst I had been unnecessarily nervous of meeting Lord Jeffrey Archer, I was now quite used to famous names and so was very calm about meeting Mr. Al Fayed.

But I was wrong to be!

Showing our kittens at Harrods went flawlessly. Part of the pet department was cordoned off for us, Sarah and I proudly wore our Harrods name tags, and there were posters everywhere proclaiming that *Sarez Bengals* were in the pet department! I didn't become nervous until I noticed all the staff suddenly scurrying round, sweeping, cleaning and wiping. I asked one why. "**He's coming**

down to see you", she whispered, emphasising the "**he**" (the staff were reluctant to say his name out loud). Then I heard all the various departments ring each other to warn their colleagues, whispering: "*he's on his way*".

When one looks around and sees everyone else is terrified, it becomes contagious!

Mr. Al Fayed treated us well, but he is a very imposing figure, always surrounded by numerous body guards - he rarely spoke to us directly, instead communicating via his

guards, even though we were right next to him. His presence is wholly dominating and I understood why his staff were nervous.

Meeting him was interesting, but it wasn't as relaxing as meeting other well-known figures, whose down to earth demeanour immediately puts one at ease. Mr. Al Fayed wanted one of our SBT brown marbles, *Sarez Natala*, and he picked her up and started to walk to an office beckoning us to follow so as to finalise the sale. But I wasn't sure that this is what I wanted. I had a split second to think, realising that I could be on the brink of either cementing a long lasting relationship with the owner of the world's most famous store... or that I was about to insult a very powerful and influential man. I looked at *Natala*, a cat who we adored... and the decision was instantaneous. I called Mr. Al Fayed back and politely informed him she wasn't for sale. *He was not very happy...*

Money, power and prestige can't always buy everything... if we are even vaguely worried about a prospective new home, we turn them down, no matter whom it is or how much money they offer. Our kittens come first.

However, surprisingly, we were invited to show again, although Mr. Al Fayed never came to see us. Later, several newspapers heard about what had happened and tried to buy the story. But we have integrity and would never want publicity that humiliates another, so we refused. *And we kept Natala.*



Sarez Natala (SBT Female) - Circa August 1996

Louis Manzi

The media refers to Louis Manzi as the “Richard Branson of the South”, and the name does betray the multi-millionaire nightclub owners’ success. Lou’s wife, Marion, saw us and our Bengals in a front page feature in *The Mail on Sunday*, and they came to visit in September 1996, choosing two F2 kittens, a brown marble named *Sarez Mouffassa* and a brown spotted called *Sarez Jambo*.

But it didn't end there - Lou did much more for us...

Most do not really understand how hard the work is for people such as Sarah and me, or how astonishingly stressful it is. Looking after and being responsible for such a vast collection of delicate, rare and expensive cats, as well as our many other animals, is truly exhaustive. We almost *never* have days off, nor take breaks, nor do we even go away for a weekend, let alone for a holiday. We totally devote our lives to our animals, to our clients and to the smooth running of our menagerie. We frequently work 18 hours a day and sometimes more. Occasionally, we don't even bother going to bed for 48 hours at a time if, for example, we are working late one night writing articles and then need to be up at the crack of dawn the next day in order to start feeding and cleaning up after our animals.

Sarah and I are used to the hard work, though. If one chooses to devote oneself to so many living creatures, then such a hectic routine is inevitable. *But what is distressing is that my fiancée and I spend so little **quality** time with one another.* We used to when we were young and didn't have animals, doing many fun, carefree things together. But our many “children” have to take precedence over all else.

I think Lou realised that. He was certainly determined to give us a night off, and one day in the autumn of 1996, he sent his chauffeur driven Bentley to pick us up and drive us 100 miles to his home in Southend. Lou and Marion took us out for a beautiful meal and then on to one of his famous nightclubs as guests of honour, splashing out on luxuries such as caviar and the very best champagne! Despite us being together for so long, Sarah and I hadn't been to many nightclubs together, and so it was thrilling!

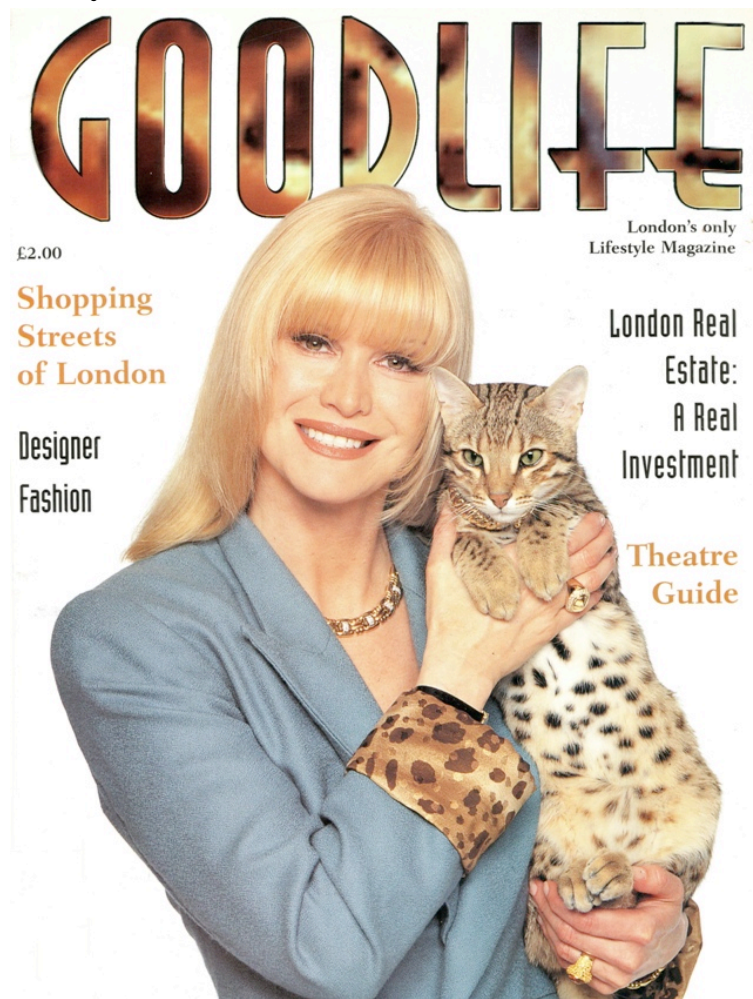
Looking back, I genuinely think that was one of the nicest evenings that Sarah and I have spent together in many years. Not just being wined and dined and taken to a club - but also for the huge responsibilities to be lifted off our shoulders... even just for a short time.

*On the way home I vividly remember cuddling Sarah in the back of the Bentley... tightly holding the girl I love so much, as she gently rested her head on my shoulder. **I felt so close to her... so connected to her... we were one... my adoration for her was stronger than ever.** And for those few hours, she and I had no other worries or stress. It was **our** time. Just "Esmond and Sarah" again - even if it was just for that one night. Heaven...*

Most take such freedom for granted. But to me, it was magical.

I was so grateful to Lou for that; I thanked him, but he replied that it was he who was indebted to us as his kittens have "*enriched his life*" and have "*brought him something special*". An honour indeed, when one considers what else this gentleman owns.

Cindy Jackson



Cindy Jackson & Kato - Cover of Goodlife Magazine - Circa 1998

Model and socialite Cindy Jackson is as beautiful in real life as she is in the press. She adores leopards and other wild cats, so much so that almost her entire home is furnished with items and materials that copy their stunning markings. And so when she visited our home in January 1998, her mouth dropped open when she saw our Bengals, and she ended up staying so long that she had to cancel a magazine shoot later that day!

Eventually, Cindy chose a rare brown spotted F2 male kitten who she named *Kato* (*Sarez Allspots*) and took him home in her car, perched contentedly on her knee. She promised that she would walk him every day in Hyde Park and take him everywhere with her, including to all her photo shoots. And she wasn't joking! Despite being the grandchild of a wild leopard cat, *Kato* has

taken to modelling as if he was born for it and has been photographed with Cindy in many major fashion magazines, including several front pages. He's met royals at gala parties and his beautifully defined spots and very chilled personality brings out admirers everywhere - and his diamond Cartier collar also helps grab attention as well!

In 1998, *Kato* entered the **Guinness World Records** as the *world's most expensive cat* at £25,000. Later, *Sarez Zeus* commanded a higher price, but *Kato* remains as famous today as he was then, mainly due to his extensive social life and high society connections!

Jonathan Ross

Jonathan Ross' dry wit can be captivating, but until I met him, I never went out of my way to watch his TV shows - such comedy isn't normally my thing. However, I must say that he's one of the nicest stars I've met... he's so humble and genuinely *cool* in real life.

Jonathan invited my fiancée and I and some of our kittens to his London mansion on the 9th of June 2000. Sarah had only just come out of hospital having given birth to our daughter, Kitten Patricia Pixie-Bell Gay (who shares her unusual Christian name with Jonathan's daughter, Betty Kitten), but she felt well enough, and so we took our 9 day old baby to bring a little bit of the wild to the Ross household. Jonathan and his family wanted to know



Esmond & Kitten Gay & Jonathan Ross (with Sarez Atsu) - 9th June 2000



World Record - Kato (F2) - February 1998

everything about the breed and so I spent several hours explaining, and by the end they had fallen in love with a brown spotted F2 male named *Sarez Atsu*. But as he was too young to go, they booked a date to come to our home and pick up their baby.

A few weeks later the Ross family arrived, and after a while they asked to see

our **Sarez Animal Rescue Sanctuary**; I started to panic as I knew that if they walked around our huge fields, they were likely to get pecked, chewed and intensively rubbed by our animals, and so I had the idea of using our tractor to tow them around in our trailer. Much to my surprise, they agreed and so I bundled them in and started the engine... and as I pulled the famed TV star, his wife and three children around my muddy fields, squashed into a tatty old food trailer, all I could think was: "*pinch me someone, wake me up - is this really happening?*" - *It was one of the most surreal moments of my life!*

But the Ross family seemed to enjoy it! They fed our *wallabies*, our *road injured deer* and our *ex-battery birds*. They stroked *Winston*, our *3-legged pig* and the lightest children rode on *Titus*, our *55 year old donkey*. They laughed as *Flake*, *Goldie* and *Bandit*, three of our *llamas* nibbled their clothes, and screamed as our *rheas* chased the tractor and trailer around the field, thinking it was feeding time! Then they met some of our other animals including *Buffy*, our *lemur*, *Nutty*, our *red fox*, *Jenny* and *Jerry*, our *genets*, and our five *parrots*... and they marvelled when they saw our wild cats prowl around their enclosures.

In 2004, the Ross family bought a second F2 kitten, a beautiful marble female with 40% wild blood called *Sarez Alecdruimbeg* - we're so proud to have found such a nice home.

Louis Mariette

In May 2003, a very flamboyant gentleman named Louis Mariette contacted us having seen our kittens gracing the pages of ***The London Magazine***. Louis is a milliner, described by the media as an "international sensation", and whose world famous hat designs adorn the heads of many well-known celebrities and British royalty.

Louis was holding a fashion show at Kensington Roof Gardens and wanted our Bengals to be part of it, as his collection of hats had a leopard theme. So, Sarah and I took one of our snow spotted F2s called *Sarez Snow King*, and our unique, 90% wild blood F1, *Sarez Zeus*, and they immediately became the centre of attention, stealing the limelight from the models! Both cats behaved wonderfully and as a finale, Louis marched down the catwalk with our snow Bengal galloping in front on a leash, unfazed by all the camera flashes. Then they posed for the press at the end of the runway, both did a dramatic twirl and returned back stage amidst rapturous applause!



Louis Mariette & Sarez Snow King (F2) - 13th May 2003

Meanwhile, *Zeus* was taken by model Lady Emily Compton to an awaiting Jaguar car and was photographed cuddling him, whilst wearing an amazing diamond studded, gold leaf hat, for sale at a reputed £5 million - *both the cat and the headwear complimented each other wonderfully, not just in beauty, but also because each is the most costly of their kind!*

And after the show we mingled with the star-studded audience, all of whom were entranced by the cats we were holding; amongst others, Princess Anne's daughter, Zara Phillips, spent half an hour speaking to us whilst gently stroking our very contented felines.

Soon after this event, clothing designers and high society magazines started clamouring to do photo shoots with our cats, and so the luckiest of our felines found themselves adorned in gem-encrusted collars and cuddling up to internationally renowned models whilst advertising *Armani, Versace and Cavalli haute couture in Vogue Pelle, Tatler and Country Life!* The campaigns were successful, too, with the cats looking just as provocative and seductive as the models... and far more enticing than the clothes!



Model with Sarez Ilori (F2 Female) - Two of Three Pages in Country Life Magazine - 30th Oct. 2003

I'm so proud of the calmness of our cats at all these types of events, from our F1s to our SBTs. But we do work hard to rear them to be that way. From just a few weeks old, Sarah and I try to prepare our kittens for everything that they may encounter when older; we take them for walks, they come with us in the car for leisure drives, and we encourage visitors and our daughter to handle them. Animals with *any* amount of wild blood need this intense socialisation as it creates kittens that are unafraid and that are affectionate, even in very difficult and hectic environments.

And the results are evident; whilst meeting all the new people they've encountered, and during all the gala parties they've been to, and on all the TV programmes and photo shoots they've been involved in, not one of our early or late generation Bengals has ever played up. *Whilst being watched by so many, all have behaved superbly, showing only loving and gentle temperaments... the Bengal breed could not have asked for better ambassadors.*

However, this is not just a testament to our cats and to how we rear them, but also to the breed itself and the genes within it. And together, they form some of the reasons why the Bengal is now one of the most popular pedigree cats in the world.

Our devotion to our cats has taken Sarah and me on a journey; one that spans from anonymity to mass media recognition... a journey that has enabled us to help save abused animals and to conserve some of the world's most endangered felids. And during this journey, we've encountered so many different people, from all walks of life - from multi-billionaires, to the very poorest but equally deserving. And regardless of their wealth or status, they have become some of our dearest friends...

And it's all thanks to the magnificent Bengal... a cat that now not only mesmerises us... but seemingly everyone else as well.

C. Esmond Gay

Sarex Bengals

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Dedicated to Boo Boo - my feline son

Retirement Addition (2008)

Sarah and I achieved a phenomenal amount during the 11 years that we bred Bengals and many of our accomplishments are still unsurpassed. We obsessively chased every one of our goals and ambitions and didn't stop until we had succeeded. And everything we did was meticulous and done to perfectionist standards.

However, this entailed working up to 18 hours a day, 7 days a week, and with few breaks or holidays. In hindsight, we did too much too fast because the enormous stress that we put ourselves under, plus looking after hundreds of animals almost single-handedly, took its toll on us mentally, emotionally and physically. By 2004, Sarah and I were suffering from severe exhaustion and so reluctantly, we retired. We hoped to lead a quieter life in Latin America, living and working with their endangered cats.

Our larger wild felines went to wildlife parks, our rescued animals went to sanctuaries and private homes, whilst many of our Bengals and leopard cats went to Pauline and Frank Turnock of Gayzette Bengals - they look after and nurture our cats, and are expanding the breeding programme that we worked so hard to create.

I stay in regular contact with Pauline and Frank and offer them my support and advice on the Bengal and wild cats. I follow their achievements, and behind the scenes, I am there for them and for the beautiful cats that we once so proudly owned.

To Sarah and me, our cats were more than just pets or breeding animals - they were our family. And within the articles I wrote, my deeply emotional descriptions of them and how they influenced our lives, portrays just how powerfully I love them; and so naturally, I feel terrible loss and miss them tremendously. However, I am grateful for the 11 wonderful years that they graced our home, and for the honour and privilege of being able to share part of my life with them... *and for the amazing memories that they've left me with.*

C. Esmond Gay