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By Bria Bolton Moore

Irwin

At Home in Oklahoma

the Kangaroo:

You may remember him—covered in fur, weighs about 60 pounds, hails from Australia, wears a diaper and loves Twizzlers licorice candy. Irwin, a red kangaroo, became a local celebrity in 2011 when news outlets covered the debate between Christie Carr, Irwin's owner, and the City of Broken Arrow, Okla.

At the time, Carr was unaware that as an exotic animal, Irwin wasn't allowed to live with her in her home in Broken Arrow. The city council voted to create an exotic animal ordinance exemption that would allow Carr to keep Irwin within the city limits as long as specific criteria were met—like a \$50,000 liability insurance policy for any injuries inflicted by the animal, certification that the animal had appropriate housing for its health and proof that federal and state guidelines for licensing were met.

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In April 2011, an anonymous donor took care of the insurance.

“These nice people saw the story and fell in love with Irwin,” Carr said. “I had no idea any of this was happening. The insurance company contacted me and told me that I had someone anonymously wanting to buy the insurance.”

Meanwhile, Carr said she was waiting on the permit application from the city and followed up three different times, but the application was never ready.

“One day, we came home, and there was a sign on the door from animal control saying that we were illegally housing a kangaroo there, and that I had never followed through to get the license,” she said.

Carr eventually became so frustrated with the process that she packed up Irwin and moved to the Claremore, Okla., area where she volunteered at Wild Heart Ranch, a wildlife rescue and rehabilitation center. They stayed for about a year before moving to the Garold Wayne Interactive Zoological Park in Wynnwood, Okla. While living at the zoo, Carr said the animal nursery was set up in her room.


“We had six bear cubs in cribs in there,” she recalls. “At one time, we had three wolf pups. Irwin would stand at the crib and stare in at the wolf pups—he loved those.”

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Irwin and Carr stayed at the zoo for about a year. Today, they split time between McAlester, Okla., where Carr has family, and right outside of Tulsa near Verdigris. Carr said life is busy but good.

"He's doing great—growing like a weed."

Becoming Family

Carr first met Irwin in April 2010 while volunteering at a local animal sanctuary. Irwin was about 5 and a half months old when he ran into a fence, broke his neck and became partially paralyzed. At the time, he couldn't hop, and some were unsure if he would live through the injury. Carr was recovering from a stroke and working through depression. Her therapist suggested pet therapy.

"He and I bonded, and you could tell that he and I were both doing better because of each other," Carr said. "So, the lady that owned him just gave him to me. I got involved with pet therapy, and two weeks later, I'm raising a kangaroo," Carr said between laughs.

When Carr was 4 years old, the hopping marsupials fascinated her. She saw her first live kangaroo at an Arkansas petting zoo and dressed in a kangaroo costume for Halloween. Fast forward, and now her childhood dream is reality.

According to National Geographic, red kangaroos are the world's largest marsupials and grow to weigh up to 200 pounds and stand 3.25 to 5.25 feet tall, not including the tail. Irwin, however, weighs about 60 pounds and is about 3 and a half feet tall. Red kangaroos' average life span in the wild is about 23 years, and Irwin is about 5 years old now.

A Day in the Life

A typical day for Irwin begins with his breakfast of choice—a peanut butter sandwich (and some kangaroo chow). Carr then fills his bowl with lettuce, tomatoes, blueberries, sweet potato and other fruits and vegetables that he munches on throughout the day.

"The rest of his day is spent watching TV and cartoons, playing with his stuffed animals, sleeping, laying around on the floor—he doesn't do a whole lot," Carr said of her pet kangaroo who prefers being inside to outside.

His favorite snacks are puff corn, popcorn (caramel and regular), gummy bears, animal crackers and Goldfish crackers.

Carr said being "Irwin's mom" hasn't always been easy. Like many who have an exotic pet, she has experienced backlash from animal rights activists.

"When I first got Irwin, he was injured, he wouldn't eat, and he was a baby fresh out of the pouch," Carr said. "Everybody told me, 'Y'all have bonded. Whatever you're eating, try to get him to take a bite. We've got to get some nutrition in him, and then we'll work on a diet later.' He wouldn't drink water. He was dehydrated. He got an addiction to Gatorade. OK, so Gatorade wasn't great for him, but at least he was getting nutrition."

Carr gradually watered down the Gatorade, and now Irwin will drink water.

"They were having a fit because, oh my God, I put him in clothes, and I let him have macaroni and cheese and cheese puffs—he loves Cheetos."

In many ways, Irwin is more like a child than a kangaroo. He sleeps in a bed, watches

TV and wears a diaper.

"I call him 'my boy'; we call me 'momma,'" Carr said. "He's just a member of the family, and he's been raised kind of like a kid. He has to sleep in the bed right beside momma on his pillow until you go to sleep, and then he wants your pillow. He's a cuddle bug."

And just like raising a child, there are frustrating days to accompany the sweet ones.

"There are days that you get so aggravated at him, you could pinch his little head off—like yesterday when he ate another pair of ear buds, but I couldn't imagine a day without him," Carr said.

Carr isn't the only one who adores Irwin.

"I remember the very first time I saw him, and holding him in my arms, it was just like love, immediate love," said Barbara Turner who met Carr and Irwin while she was volunteering at Wild Heart Ranch about four years ago. Turner sometimes watches Irwin at her home in Bartlesville. They're so close, Turner even has a framed photo of Irwin in her home.

"We have this incredible bond," she said. "I'm his Aunt Barbara, and he's my little 'nephroo.' Whenever he first sees me, he'll always look in my hand because he expects something—a treat."

Turner always makes sure she has a preferred snack on-hand—Twizzlers, animal crackers or Cheetos.

From the children at Turner's church to the residents of a nursing home where Carr and Irwin have volunteered, Irwin the kangaroo has nuzzled his way into many Oklahomans' hearts.





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