

Sarez Bengals – Our Story...

By C. Esmond Gay – Sarez Bengals – 2004

Bengal cats are unique because their close relatives are the magnificent Leopard Cats that stalk the jungles of Asia. Sarah and I fell in love with them, and fuelled by our dreams and powered by our imaginations, we quickly became pioneers of the Bengal in GB; we were one of the first to breed them in the early 1990s, the first to breed all the main colours, the first to breed early generations - and the first to hybridize from not just one Leopard Cat, but two! Our work has broken new ground in the British Bengal fancy, and is still unsurpassed - and the media publicity surrounding our cats has helped to propel the breed into what it is today;

... One of the most popular types of pedigree cat in the world!

I've always had cats as pets and I love them as one would one's own children. As a young boy, I would approach any stray in the street and bring them home to my ever patient Mother. Mesmerized, I used to sit and gaze in awe at these animals, contemplating what may go on in their minds. I bought my first when I left home at 18, a Birman named "Boo Boo". I lived for him - he was my "son", my best friend and my dearest companion.

However, *any* felid is alluring to me - fascinating and mystifying. Cats are such independent creatures, who do not blindly give their loyalty and affection as readily as some other domestic animals do... one has to *earn* their love, *deserve* it, and one has to work hard to gain their trust and respect too. If one fails, then cats will always show their disdain by being aloof...*but if one succeeds, gosh, one then knows that animal feels utter adoration for their human companion! A cat's love is the greatest of all compliments!*



My fiancée Sarah and I never intended to breed Bengals...in the early 1990s I was a buyer in a computer company, but hated it due to the stress and monotony of the job. We already had four pets; a Chinchilla named "Sou-ki", two Persians called "Chippie" and "Bluebell" as well as "Boo Boo", my "first born". However since childhood, such was my passion for cats that my fantasy was to have 30 of them by the time I was a young man – I'm not sure why I picked that figure – *I just knew that I wanted to be surrounded by them.*

So Sarah and I would often sit cuddled up on the sofa reading various cat books together - and one day whilst flicking through the pages, we set eyes on a photo of a Bengal – *I felt as though my breath had been taken away!* I was entranced at the beauty of this animal that not only looked like a Leopard, but was also their close relative! My passion for wild cats

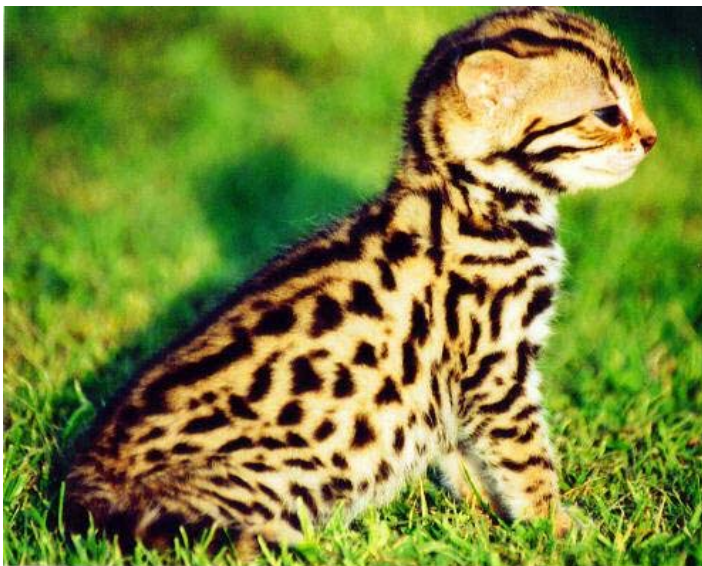
had always been the strongest of my felid obsessions, but due to the licensing laws and the costs, owning one was impossible – *yet in the Bengal I saw a stunning compromise...*

Soon after, Sarah and I started to look for one, but found that this breed was rare and expensive - we were horrified at the £3,000 price tags attached to even late generation kittens! Back then, we simply could not justify spending such huge sums on pets – we didn't have the money anyway! *And so it appeared that our new dream was not to be.*

But prior to this when I was 21 years old, I had bred from my Chinchilla, and had loved the exhilaration of it – rearing the babies and having them scampering around my home. I was a hopeless “sales man” though, and I adored the kittens so much, that after I had re-homed them, I ended up buying many of them back! *My paternal instincts were far too strong!*

And then an epiphany! Perhaps I could try again, this time breeding Bengals - but I'd have to be firmer with myself - enjoy living with these cats...and let them fund themselves! It sounded so logical! And perfect for a man who has always craved a home full of felines!

This decision was a huge change in our lives, and Sarah and I threw ourselves into this new challenge. We became friendly with some of the kinder original Bengal breeders, one of whom even suggested a prefix for us to use – a mix of both our Christian names – “**Sarez**”. ***Perfect! These events were our dream come true, and so what better way to celebrate that***



than to incorporate our names into it? This breeder also helped us to find our first Bengals; two females who had been rescued in Southampton. We went to see “*Smartie*” and “*Cleo*”, who were beautiful quality, but were nervous animals due to their tumultuous upbringings – *I've never seen a cat climb 9 foot vertically up a wall in sheer panic - but I did that day.* However, we were smitten and we knew that our love would bring them round, and as we were able to buy them on breeding loan, they were a brilliant start for us.

And from then on, there was no looking back!

I am a true perfectionist and never do anything by halves, so I wanted us to do something substantial for the Bengal... I wanted our work to help and improve the breed in ways few others had before – *I wanted us to make British Bengals the most magnificent in the world!*

So Sarah and I bred and sold, then reinvested the income buying yet more top quality cats, including “*Buckholt Silky*” a Marble female, “*Rhada*”, “*Aura*” and “*Tinker*” 3 Spotted females from *Nyali* lines, “*Nyali Michelle*” a rare American F3 Marble who was also the Mother of our first three F1s, and 2 studs “*Nyali Bobby Dazzler*” and “*National Velvet*”.

And within 2 years, we had added yet more, giving us *all* the colours, *all* the generations, and a *huge* variety of pedigrees that enabled us to do any matings without any inbreeding!

“Exemplifying a perfect harmony of a felid appearance and the alluring personality of a puppy, Esmond Gay’s kittens are unique – the best of the best...”

The London Magazine (2001)

A decade later, and our Bengal family has grown to over 60 cats and we own many pure bred wild felines as well, including 15 Asian Leopard Cats – *we had to buy a large estate to house them all!* And despite their numbers, Sarah and I remain as hands on and as intimate with our animals, as we were in the early days. We have learnt from the mistakes of others, and *never* keep our kittens in outside pens – as our first two rescued Bengals proved, that is highly detrimental to their characters! *Surely there is little point in owning one of the world's most majestic creatures, if one is unable to neither stroke nor get near them.*



Instead, we rear our babies in our bedrooms because we want to enjoy them as they grow up – *one really hasn't lived until one knows what it feels like to sit down and instantly be enveloped in a mass of tiny, warm bodies – it's so relaxing and all stress simply melts away!* We never tire of the companionship that our kittens give as they keep us warm, talk to us in their soft purring voices and cuddle up to us under the blankets at night. And we return their love, ensuring that our kittens are overtly friendly and outstandingly docile, not just with us, but also with young children - we ensure that our daughter *Kitten Gay* always has a litter of any generation in her bedroom – it's good for them and for her. And over the baby monitor we listen to her laughing and playing with them - and we hear the kittens meow softly as they gently show their affection towards her.

Sarah and I became so enamoured with Bengals not only because of their beauty, but also because of their amazing characters; they're sociable, intelligent and have an abundance of energy - seeing these mischievous mini whirlwinds dashing around one's home is like watching exuberant little cubs playing in the wild! Yet they are the ultimate *lap cats* too and are forever the poser, performing silly antics for their owners' entertainment. And because of their inquisitive, alert natures and "*look at me*" attitude, Bengals make wonderful show cats as well – and many who adopt our babies, enjoy great success.

The *first three crosses* from the **Asian Leopard Cat** are referred to as F1s, F2s and F3s – the "*F*" standing for "*Filial*", and the numbers denoting their generation from the wild -



important as there *are* differences between them. All the *later* generations after this, are known as "*Stud Book Tradition*" (*SBT*) Bengals because once *past* the F4 stage, there is very little difference between them.

Until 2000, F2s were the rarest and most highly prized of all Bengals as no earlier generations

were available. Of course, the scarce F1s did exist...*but we had spent fortunes buying most of them in the 1990s*. The 2 females have since produced some of the worlds most striking babies including “*Sarez Satin*”, the UK’s first F2 Brown Marble and “*Sarez Eppie*”, the first F2 Snow Marble to be bred in GB, as well as F2 Snow and Brown Leopards too.

These F1s have also become our most favourite pets - quite a feat when one has so many; “*Leopardette*” and “*Baby Gem*” have bonded very closely with me, whilst “*Occie*” is obsessed with Sarah! The love that these three first generation Bengals give us, proves that hybrids can be trustworthy, tame and very friendly - if reared with a lot of love and care.

“Esmond and Sarah’s kittens are one of the greatest Masterpieces to stem from Mother Nature – quite simply, they are the epitome of perfection...”

Debretts Magazine (2000)

But Sarah and I wanted to do far more than breed F2s from USA lines – we wanted to help the breed in a truly long lasting way – we wanted to breed our own first generations...

The first cross between the Leopard Cat and a domestic is very difficult to accomplish as the wild cat must be tame and be brought up with domestic females. *And even then there is only a 1 in 20 chance of hybridization occurring, due to the complexity of the genetics and the differences between their anatomies. But after years of huge financial investment, a lot of hard work and extreme risks, Sarah and I finally bred the first F1 Bengals in the UK.*

In 2000 our Asian Leopard Cat “*Sarez Little L*” hybridized and then astonishingly, in 2003 “*Sarez Apollo*” a 2nd male, followed suite! *Only a handful of breeders in the world have hybridized from one, and it is almost unheard of that two Leopard Cats have bred within the same facility – a dream! These events are the pinnacle of all our achievements, and Sarah and I are proud that against the odds, we created two totally new pedigree lines for the Bengal breed.*



Both Leopard Cats have now had many babies – we re-home the sterile males, but have kept 14+ of the fertile females, plus our 75% wild blood F1s, like “*Sarez Pow Wow*” and “*Sarez Ebony*”. Our work interest’s scientists too; *Dr. Andrew Kitchener*, the Curator of the *National Museums of Scotland*, studies our F1s to understand how 2 species can inter breed when there are so many genetic and physical variations between them, and he uses what he learns, to widen the gene pools of threatened wild cats. *This research is important, so much so, that there’s even a small part of the Museum dedicated to us and our work.*

In 2003, Sarah and I embarked upon another complex project; we bred one of our 75% wild blood F1s back to the Leopard Cat, and created what is believed to be the *world’s first 90% wild blood F1 – “Sarez Zeus”*. *He perfectly encapsulates the appearance of his wild cat Father, yet has an ultra friendly character.* Due to his £100,000 price tag, he snatched “*The World’s Most Expensive Cat*” title from “*Sarez Cato*” (in the “*Guinness World Records*”), who was one of the first F2s to be bred in the UK, and who we sold in 1998 for

£25,000. “Zeus” took the world by storm and before he was 12 weeks old, he had become an international sensation, starring on 7 TV programmes and in dozens of magazine and newspapers – and behaved impeccably on all. And he is still famous today on the internet.

And our other Bengals are great ambassadors and publicists of the breed as well, having appeared on 55 TV programmes and in 100+ national magazines and newspapers. And due to their friendly dispositions, they are also used in Armani and Versace fashion shoots, in publications ranging from Vogue Pelle, to Tatler and Country Life.

Small enough to care...big enough to share... Our kittens have also captivated an eclectic mix of celebrity admirers; His Majesty the Sultan of Brunei bought SBTs and F2s, Lord Jeffrey Archer bought 2 SBTs, Rolf Harris and Lord and Lady Nourse, the Lord Justice of Appeal bought an SBT each, whilst Jonathon Ross bought 2 F2s - to name just a few.

Due to the popularity of our kittens, these and our other clients book them soon after birth, but as they're not ready to leave us until they're 13 weeks old, we encourage their new owners to visit them often. This helps to build a strong relationship between them and their



baby, and when the kittens do eventually leave us, this ensures the transition into their new home is far less stressful.

And learning from the early days when I found it so hard to part with my beloved Chinchilla kittens, Sarah and I also request that all new homes stay in contact with us – and because of this, many of them have gone on to become our closest friends. By working in this manner, we ensure that we are always there to help new owners, and to guide them throughout their kitten's life. This not only ensures that our babies lead full and enriched lives, but it also means their new families get the very best from their furry friend - and that we always retain a close bond with our kittens...

“The mystical presence of Esmond and Sarah’s cats is an extravagance that all should enjoy – they are living works of art...and the ultimate in feline luxury...”

London Goodlife (2001)

But sadly, we’ve had our share of problems too. The close relationships that we enjoy with the people who own our kittens, does not encompass all those who work in the same field as us. Even though the UK Bengal fancy *does* have some wonderful and friendly breeders, it also has its share of spiteful ones. In the early days, Sarah and I tried to fit in, but when we dared to deviate from the norm, when we did things with a more modern approach and when our cats became popular with the press and public, *a few became quite vindictive...*

I may sometimes court with the boundaries of controversy, occasionally I may struggle to conform to the restrictions of the rat race, and perhaps I am a little eccentric - but these traits **do not** make a person or their breeding programme *bad* or *wrong*. Yet my fiancée and I have been forced to defend ourselves and our work from a barrage of bitter personal attacks, from lies, innuendos and from plain malicious back biting.

So unjust was this persecution, that in 1996 the media jumped in to protect us, and one of the subsequent articles was printed in the *Sunday Mail* and entitled “**Fur and Loathing**”. In it, an investigative reporter exposed *the truth*, by interviewing many of our clients and supporters – *and to ensure no bias, he also spoke to **all** our detractors as well*. He then checked the accuracy of *everything* – and the result was a **7,000 word front page cover story** containing a glowing report of our cats, our practices and our pricing structure (even how we sometimes *give kittens away* to deserving homes!). And it also contained a scathing condemnation of *some* other breeders... one of whom even ridiculed my depression when interviewed, and then added that she: “*wouldn’t stop her campaign until she’d destroyed me*”. Yet, I barely knew her! *But the reporter seemed to like us, and later bought a kitten*.

After this feature and several more, many left us alone, but a few persisted with one gripe after another. Some, who couldn’t breed early generations, had the pertinence to condemn our hybridization work, forcing *Jean Mill*, the founder of the breed, to write a public letter to a cat magazine, affirming the importance of our F1s, F2s and **all** other filial Bengals!

*Such venom **does** hurt, but Sarah and I eventually realised that what **truly** matters, is the opinions of those who own our babies, the opinions of our friends and the kind words spoken by the more compassionate breeders*. We have not “performed any miracles” – others in the UK could have achieved what we have, just as many have in America. It’s unfortunate that some prefer to squabble, rather than to work together for the greater good – to improve the creatures that entwine us, and that we all purportedly care so much about.

But I think that the same occurs in any field; there will always be those who act decisively for a belief or a goal... and there will also always be those who refuse to act - and who instead, simply pick apart the efforts of the rest. That’s life. That’s human nature... and that’s one of the reasons why I turned to animals many years ago.

However, as relentless and determined as ever, none of this stopped Sarah and me – in fact we expanded! Being lovers of the unusual, we fell in love with another rare and unusual cat called the “**Sphynx**” - in 2000 we imported **13** of the world’s best, and are now breeding some breathtaking kittens. The Sphynx are as unique as the Bengal, but for very different reasons; they are completely bald and are quite outrageous to look at - their huge ears rest upon delicately sculptured heads and nature has painted a myriad of rainbow patterns upon their sleek and athletic bodies, ranging from soft lilacs to vibrant reds. They are as dainty as a ballerina, and their soft, suede skin feels more like a cuddly hot water bottle – making stroking them, almost addictive! And like the Bengal, they’re loving and very playful!

And the income from all our kittens goes towards two good causes. The first is “**The Sarez Wild Cat Conservation Programme**” in which we work with *Terry Moore* from the “**Cat Survival Trust**” at Welwyn, and *Peter James* from the “**Santago Rare Leopard Project**” in Herts. We keep **African Leopards, Servals and Ocelots** and want to obtain other endangered species for conservation purposes. This is an exciting project, and it fulfils a life long passion of mine!



Our “*Rescue Sanctuary for Abused Animals*” is a little different; Sarah and I set it up a few years ago when we went to an abattoir to get food for our wild cats - we did buy the meat...*but such is our empathy for these discarded animals that we also came home with 3 live pigs that were to be slaughtered.* It all began from there, and ever since, we’ve taken in any animals that require a permanent, loving home. Our fields are full of rescues ranging from *3 legged Pigs, road injured Deer, ex-battery birds, ancient Geese and Ducks, lame Swans, deformed Rheas and a 55 year old Donkey – and they’re all part of our family.*

We’re proud that our Bengals are helping so many endangered and less fortunate animals.

Years ago as Sarah and I looked through that book, never could we have envisaged where it would all lead. Back then, we just wanted a spotted pet cat... yet now we live with so many more amazing creatures. From the docile to the wild... from the most expensive to the least wanted... from the deformed to the most beautiful – these wondrous animals all share our home, our lives and our hearts.

And we are well aware of what made it all possible...the mischievous, rambunctious yet ever loving relative of the Asian Leopard Cat...

The beautiful Bengal cat!

C. Esmond Gay

Sarez Bengals

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Dedicated to Sarah – thank you

Photos from top to bottom; (1) F1 “Leopardette of Sarez”, (2) 75% w/b Sarez F1 kitten, (3) F1 Sarez Bengal kitten, (4) F1 “Baby Gem of Sarez”, (5) 90% w/b F1 “Sarez Zeus”, (6) 90% w/b F1 “Sarez Zeus”, (7) Clouded Leopard.

Addition 2008; Due to the extreme stress of our work with the Bengal and wild cat conservation, Sarah and I retired in 2004. We had achieved many of our goals, and so our larger felines went to wildlife parks, and our unique Bengals and Leopard Cats went to Pauline and Frank Turnock of Gayzette Bengals - they now continue with 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 I offer them my full support and advice on the Bengal and wild cats. I closely follow their achievements, and behind the scenes, I am there for them and for the beautiful felines I once so proudly owned.

Being so involved with their work lessens my feelings of loss over my beloved cats...

C. Esmond Gay

Sarez Bengals