

Selling Bengals to the Stars!

By C. Esmond Gay – Sarez Bengals - 2004

Just ten years ago I could never have dreamt that a unique spotted cat would change the lives of Sarah and me, giving our previously bland existence so much pleasure and exhilaration. This entrancing breed has brought joy and comfort to us both. And our cats have given us something else that we will always cherish; they have made us many new friends - genuine, 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 dream animals. Nature has bestowed so much upon these exotic animals – astonishing beauty, independent characters and souls that are full of fire... *but for most, they are unattainable - an impossible dream.*

However, in the early 1990s 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 hybrid that resembled a Leopard, but that required no license – *what a compromise!* *A little part of nature, for people such as us!*



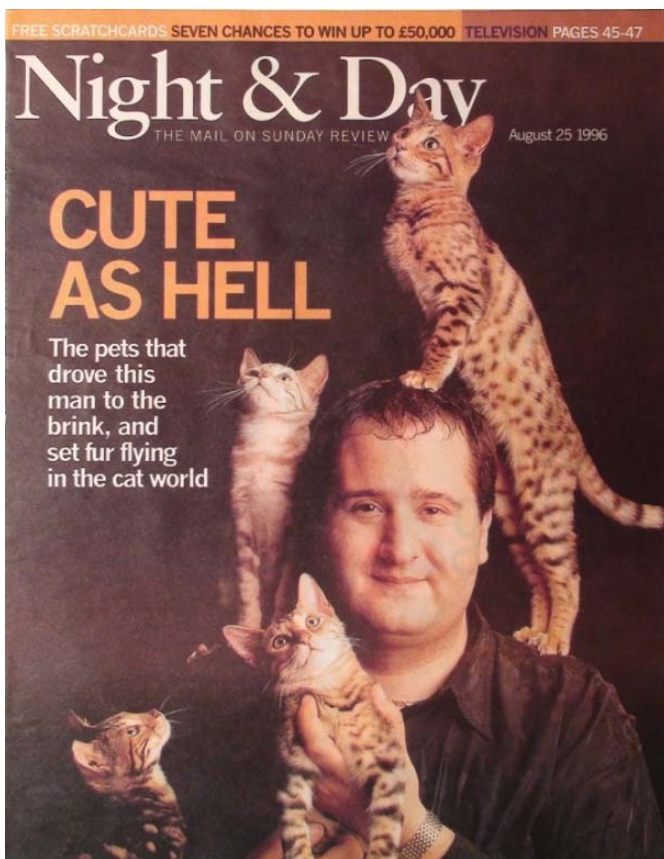
We were hooked - love at first sight as they say. But, I knew I’d never be satisfied with just one - I had always craved a home *full* of cats and so from that day on, my heart constantly whispered to my head: “*what better type, than one that emulates the beauty of the wild?*”

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 individual and so within a few years, my fiancée and I owned 60+ of the best Bengals in existence - all the colours and all the generations including 3 of just 4 super rare Filial 1 (F1) Bengal x Leopard Cat hybrids in Britain (and we later bred *many* more ourselves). We also bought a number of superb studs and many beautiful queens, funding their purchase by re-homing their babies. *My once idle obsession had quickly turned us into one of the largest and most significant breeders of these cats, in the world!*

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 ancestors - relentless amounts of energy keeps these little dynamos leaping 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 domestics, enabling them to interact better with humans. So they're comforting too; whenever biting depression strikes me, these endearing Leopard look-a-likes smother me with their silken bodies and purr in my ear, telling me: "...Daddy, we're here for you. Everything will be alright. We love you and that's forever..."

We didn't expect anyone 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, no one could have been more surprised than us.



It started in 1994 with some minor local newspaper articles about our cats. Nothing special. But, they were followed by a very large article about our F1 "Occie" in the *Daily Mail* – we were amazed that a national newspaper was interested in us! Then we were invited to appear on some TV shows. *It was all so exciting - yet frightening too!* Sarah and I thought it would all blow over. *But it didn't.*

To begin with, the publicity was about the quality of our cats and the Bengal breed, but after a while, it expanded and became about us too. It was evident that I don't conform to the stereotypical British cat breeder - I broke the mould, I'm controversial and I'm not afraid to go head to head against the cat fancy establishments themselves. *I do what I believed to be right for my cats and for the breed – angering those with more antiquated*

mindsets, but my approach is also refreshing and modern to others. The press liked that.

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 of 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* who inspire me! The press claimed that my *special kinship* with my animals is unusual for a young man, but I disagreed, and stated that my animals don't persecute nor hurt me as humans have - *and I explained some of the many traumatic childhood events in my life, that caused me bond so closely with them.*

And I've always been happy to open up publicly, saying that my cats are *"my children"* and that I'd *"give up anything for them"*, even leaving them *"all my worldly goods"* in my will. On one programme, I even shouted down a man who dared tell the presenter that *"cats were pointless"*. Normally I am so docile – but just then, I went red and exploded on live TV. Everyone was shocked, but my words still received a hearty round of applause!

But of course the cats have always been the real stars; they behave superbly on TV and during photo shoots. This has drawn some famous names to our kittens – which fascinated the press even more. And so the snowball effect gathered momentum... and intensified!

One of the most astonishing features was a **7,000 word, front page cover story** in the *Sunday Mail* in 1996 – I’ve rarely seen so many pages dedicated to one subject... let alone us and our cats! Another surreal experience was when I was flicking through *Hello!* magazine in a newsagent and as I turned a page... *my fiancée’s face casually beamed back at me from a large feature – she hadn’t even been formerly interviewed, nor had we been told that anything was appearing!* Such press coverage led to more TV appearances, and then to our cats advertising **Armani and Versace fashion in Vogue Pelle, Tatler and Country Life magazines!** What a compliment to us and our mini Leopards!

The publicity continued at a steady pace, but then exploded again from 2000 *when Sarah and I became the first breeders in the UK to hybridize from Asian Leopard Cats; first “Sarez Little L” – and then astonishingly from a second named “Sarez Apollo.” This culminated in 2003, when an extraordinary F1 we bred named “Sarez Zeus”, became “The World’s Most Expensive Cat” at £100,000.* We had wanted to keep this confidential due to the privacy of his new owner, but it was leaked, and there really isn’t much one can do except to relent and give interviews, when 5 huge satellite TV vans are parked outside one’s gates, refusing to leave and gravely irritating the neighbours! And so, over 10 days, we appeared with “Zeus” on 7 TV programmes, that were broadcast in 35 countries - and were also emblazoned over many national newspapers, not just in the UK, but worldwide!

Over the years, millions have seen our cats on over **55 TV shows and in 100 newspapers and magazines**, some of which are on the internet. *Our Bengals have become great ambassadors for the breed, bringing vast amounts of publicity to a pedigree cat that now not only mesmerises us, but seemingly everyone else too!*

Our cats have brought something else into our lives too. Whether we’ve given them away to deserving homes, or charged tens of thousands of pounds, Sarah and I bond closely to all those who own our kittens. This gives us peace of mind that they’ll be looked after forever - and that we’ll always have contact with them.

And our relationships with our better known clients are no different. I’d like to explain how and why and so here are a few of our stories;

Rolf Harris

When one peeks through one’s living room door and sees *Rolf Harris* sitting in one’s favourite armchair, *it is a great shock to the system!* During the filming of a TV programme called “*Cat Crazy*” in the mid 1990s, I stood with Sarah in the kitchen and for a few moments, was too mortified to go in and meet the famous TV artist! Ever calm, Sarah spoke to me gently and finally persuaded me – and so still trembling, I introduced myself and returned his vigorous handshake. And as Rolf and Alwen Harris spoke to me reassuringly, I relaxed and wondered *what had I feared?*



The filming of the TV programme was great fun. Our Bengal's boisterous play had recently brought an entire dresser crashing down with its contents, a full Wedgwood tea service. The producers became obsessed with it, and I had to repeat the story time and time again before they finally recorded it the way they wanted it to be aired. Take after take, Rolf had to constantly *look surprised* at my description: "*What they really knocked over a £10,000 dinner service*" he exclaimed. "Yes" I replied for the 20th time, then re-launching into exactly how! "*These things are a frequent occurrence when one shares one's home with so many cats and kittens Rolf*" I finished.

During the filming, Rolf and Alwyn fell in love with our SBT Bengals and purchased one for themselves - befitting the kitten's spotted appearance, they named him "**Leopard**". And then Rolf gave *us something special*; using all of his genius, he drew a cartoon character of "**Leopard**" snoozing on his back, lying on top of a caricature of Rolf, with the words "*You dare not disturb him*" above. It is amazing, and takes pride of place on one of our walls.

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

Esther Rantzen

I have always admired *Esther Rantzen* not because she is a TV celebrity, but for her work with "**Childline**". This charity is very close to my heart due to the problems I had whilst growing up, and I thought it wonderful that she is doing something constructive for abused children. In 1995, Sarah and I took 2 cats to her chat show named "**Esther**" – "*Boo Boo*" my Birman and "*Leopardette*" one of our tame F1 females. She sat quietly throughout the show proving how magnificently first generation Bengals can be when they're with someone they love and trust.

After being interviewed on the show, Mrs Rantzen came to our dressing room and ever gentle "*Leopardette*" lay in my arms whilst photos were taken of us. Esther and I also had a private chat about *Childline* and how animals can be such a comfort to those who have been through extreme trauma. *She's a genuinely caring lady.*



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 the UK, yet his wife is one of the most approachable ladies I have met. On the day they came to our house in the mid 1990s, she and I chatted about cats for hours.

One vivid image that I have of that visit, is *Lady Lavinia Nourse* sitting on our living room floor, playing with our tame F1 male "*Occie*" - he loved being passionately stroked by her, a member of the landed gentry, and responded by suckling her fingers and scratching at the soles of her shoes – a favourite past time of F1s. She was smitten, as was he! "*Occie*" is as close to the wild that one can get, yet he adored this total stranger – his "Mum" Sarah, had *told* him that Lady Nourse was safe and like all good "sons", he trusted her word.

Lady Nourse is caring and kind and she hated the persecution what she witnessed against Sarah and I within the Bengal fancy – *envy is a dreadful trait*. 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 club and also, along with many of our other clients, she was interviewed by investigative reporter *Jonathon Margolis* for the huge 1996 *Sunday Mail* front page cover story “*Fur and Loathing*”. This was a graphic account of what some breeders had done to us, and Lady Nourse wasn’t afraid to get involved. I’ll always feel close to her for what she did. Some breeders publicly mocked her for her loyalty, but she stood true to her own impressions of us. *And she is still one of our greatest advocates.*



Lady Nourse’s SBT kitten, “*Tippo*” has the run of their huge park-like estate, frolics in the undergrowth and climbs their trees, convinced that he’s a true wild Leopard! He swims in their pond, catches fish and puts them at Lady Nourse’s feet, fully believing they will be eaten by the household at dinner. “*Tippo*” also helps 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

Lord Archer has been one of my idols since I travelled Malaysia with my sister in the late 1980s – weeks before I met my fiancée. I read his brilliant book “*Kane and Able*” on my trip, and was in awe of him, but I never dreamt this gentleman would ever grace our home!

Lord and Lady Archer came with Lady Nourse one Sunday in 1996, and as they walked in, I smiled to myself as I heard their gasps when they saw our Bengals.

One lingering memory that has always stuck in my mind is Jeffrey Archer standing on top of one of our expensive dining room chairs, reaching up to the top of our 8ft high fish tank so that he could peer at the kittens perched on top – *and then a loud crack rang out as the chair split!* I’m not sure who was more surprised; *me, the kittens or Lord Archer!*

We then showed him our *Asian Leopard Cats* and our two beautiful hand reared *Ocelots*. 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 250,000 Ocelot pelts that were imported into the USA in 1 year, just to fulfil the desires of the fashion industry. Ever since I had obtained “*Ondine*”, my female Ocelot; I found it so difficult to relax as I stroked her. Every time I ran my hands down her silken pelt, my mind was flooded with images of the

millions of her kind, who had been trapped and suffered agonising deaths for the sake of the fur trade. Such thoughts frequently 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 other 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 – he looked at “Ondine” and her partner prowling around their luxury enclosure, and I think it dawned on him that he was looking at two of the most persecuted wild cats on earth. Then I told him about our efforts to help these and other species such as our *African Leopards and Servals* within “*The Sarez Wild Cat Conservation Programme*”, and how it was funded by sale of our Bengal kittens. I was proud that I was in a position to bring the wild cat cause to influential figures as Lord Archer – people who can help them if they choose.

The Archers chose two SBTs, a *Marble* and a *Leopard Spotted* and befitting their amusing characters, named them “*Laurel*” and “*Hardy*”! Both kittens are treasured members of their home.

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

His Majesty the Sultan of Brunei

After Lord and Lady Archer's kittens appeared within the centre pages of the *Daily Telegraph*, His Majesty the Sultan of Brunei sent a representative to our home to choose some kittens. She was a sweet and demure Malaysian lady and after a chat, she chose a scarce *F2 Leopard Spotted Bengal and Marble and Snow Leopard SBTs*. I envied the luxury life that these kittens would lead within the Sultans 240 roomed palace in Brunei!

At this time, some other breeders condemned the wealthy 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! The only difference is that the wealthy can provide the very best care that any animal could want.

Harrods of Knightsbridge

After another article in the *Daily Telegraph* in the mid 1990s about the Sultan of Brunei's kittens, his friend *Mr Al Fayed* approached us and asked Sarah and I to *show* our Bengals exclusively at *Harrods*. And so we took our *F2s* and some late generation *SBTs* to this department store, and on one occasion we met the gentleman himself. Whilst I had been unnecessarily nervous of meeting Rolf Harris, I was very calm over meeting Mr. Al Fayed.

But I was wrong to be!

Showing our kittens at *Harrods* went flawlessly. Part of the pet department was set aside for us, Sarah and I had our *Harrods* name tags on and there were posters proclaiming that “*Sarez Bengals are 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, emphasizing the “*he*” (the staff seemed reluctant to ever say his name out loud). Then I heard all the various departments ring each other to warn their colleagues that: “*he was 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 say Lord Archer etc, whose down to earth demeanour immediately puts one at ease. Mr. Al Fayed wanted one of our SBT Marbles, but they were rare then, and this female was the first Sarah and I had ever bred and we wanted to keep her, and so had to decline his offer. *I got the impression he was not very happy...*

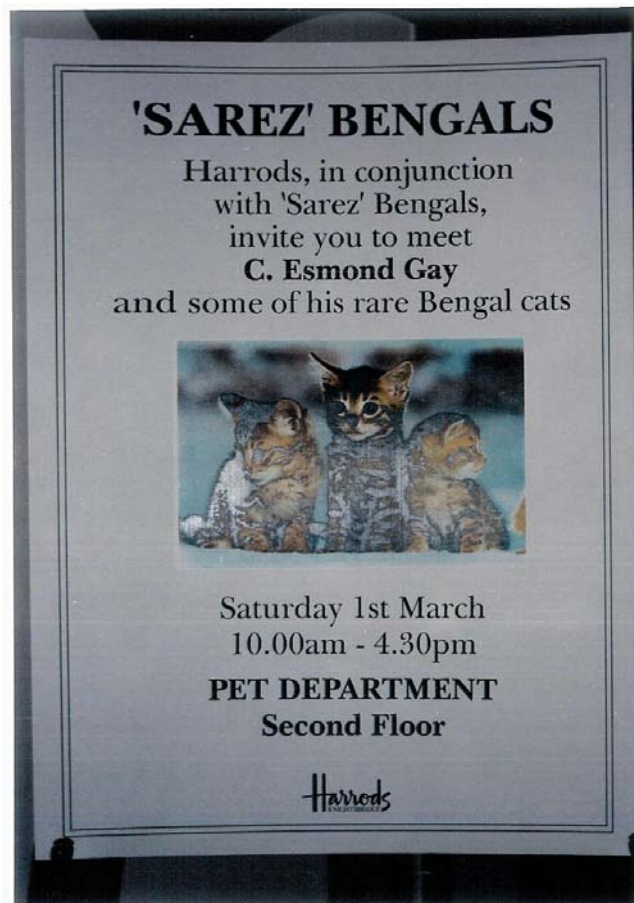
Louis Manzi

In the media, *Louis Manzi* is known as the “*Richard Branson of the south*”. Lou’s wife Marion saw us and our kittens on a front page *Sunday Mail* feature and they came to visit around 1996. I didn’t realise that he was a well known multi millionaire who owned most of the night-clubs in the south of England - Lou didn’t act super wealthy; although he did choose the *best of the best*, purchasing *two rare F2 Bengal kittens who they named “Mouffassa” and “Jambo”*.

But it didn’t end their – Lou did much more for us...

Most do not really understand how hard the work is for people such as Sarah and I, 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 never have days off, we never take a break, we never go away even for a week end, let alone for a holiday. We totally devote our lives to our animals, our clients and the smooth running of our menagerie. We frequently work 19 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, and need to be up at the crack of dawn the next day, in order to start our long routine again.

Sarah and I are used to the hard work though. If one chooses to devote oneself to animals, then such a lifestyle 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. But our many “children” have taken precedence over all else.



*I think Lou Manzi realized that. And I think he was determined to give us a night off. So one day he sent his chauffeur driven Bentley to pick us up and drove us 150 miles to his home in Southend. Lou and Marion, took us out for a beautiful meal and then on to one of his famous night-clubs as *guests of honour*, splashing out on luxuries such as caviar and the very best champagne! Despite us being together for so many years, this was one of the first times that Sarah and I had ever been in a nightclub together - *and it was thrilling!**

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

*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 – something we used to do often in the old days. **I felt so close to her... so connected to her... we were at 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 personally to me, it was magical.***

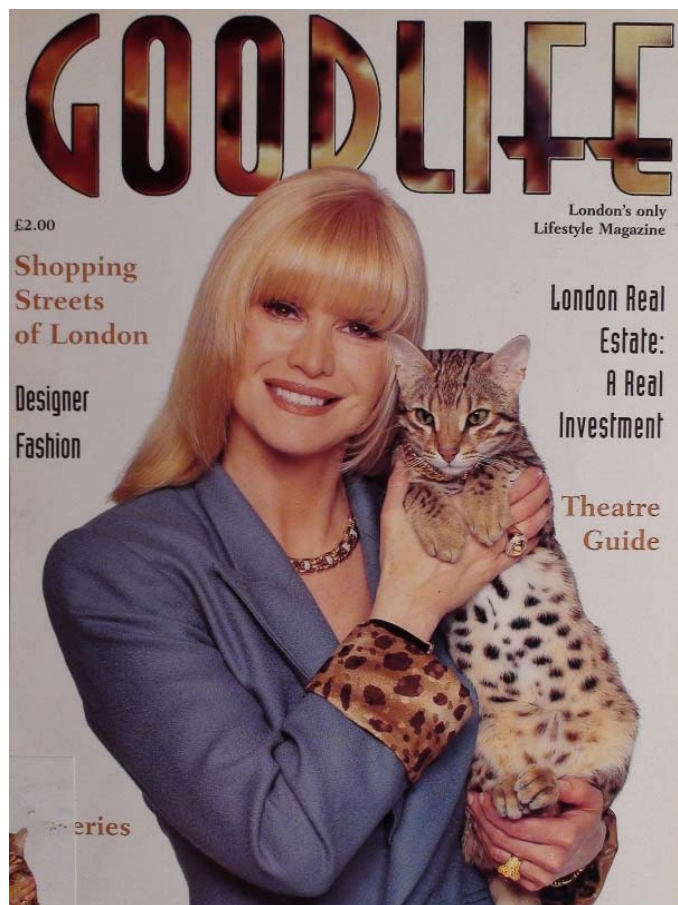
I was so grateful to Lou for that; I thanked him, but he replied it was he who was indebted to us as his kittens have “*enriched his life*” and have “*brought him something special.*”

Cindy Jackson

Cindy Jackson is as beautiful in real life as she is in the press. When she visited us around 1998, her mouth dropped open when she saw our mini Leopards!

Cindy stayed so long that she had to cancel a magazine shoot later that day! Eventually she chose *a rare F2 boy who she named “Cato”*, and took him home in her car, perched contentedly on her knee. She promised that she would walk him everyday in Hyde Park and take him everywhere with her, including to all her photo shoots.

And she wasn't joking – “*Cato*” 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 too!



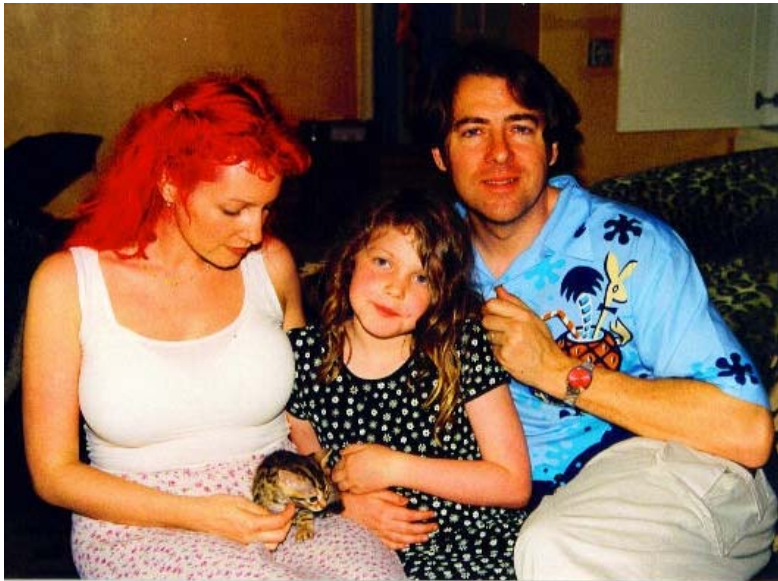
Until 2003, “Sarez Cato” was in the “Guinness World Records” for being “the most expensive ever” at £25,000. “Sarez Zeus” broke that record, but “Cato” remains as famous, mainly due to his extensive social life and high society connections!

Jonathon Ross

Jonathon Ross's 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!

Jonathon invited my fiancée and I and some of our F2 Kittens to his mansion in London in 2000 - Sarah had only just come out of hospital having given birth to our daughter *Kitten Patricia Pixie-Bell Gay*. A name that we hadn't realised she shares with Jonathon's own daughter *Betty Kitten*. Sarah felt well enough, and so we took our 4 day old daughter to bring a *little bit of the wild* to the Ross household. Jonathon and his family wanted to know *everything* about the breed and so I spent 4 hours explaining. They fell in love with a *Leopard Spotted F2 male*, but he wasn't ready to go, so they booked a date to come to our home and pick up their new baby when old enough.

A few weeks later they arrived and after a while, asked to see our “*Rescued Sanctuary for Abused Animals*”; but the only way around our large estate was them sitting in a filthy old food trailer with me pulling them in a noisy tractor. I never dreamt they'd accept my invitation - *but they did!* And as I towed Jonathon, his wife and his 3 children around my muddy fields, squashed into a tatty 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!*



The Ross family seemed to enjoy it though. 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*. And they screamed as our *Rheas* chased the tractor and trailer around the field thinking it was feeding time! They were genuinely interested in our animal rescue work, and marvelled at our wild cats.

Later the Ross's bought a 2nd F2 kitten – we are so proud to have found such a nice home.

Louis Mariette

In May 2003 a very flamboyant gentleman named *Louis Mariette* phoned us after he had seen our kittens gracing the pages of some *London Magazines*. Louis is a Milliner, described by the fashion media as an “*international sensation*”, and whose world famous hat designs grace the heads of many famous personalities and British royalty.

Louis was holding a fashion show at *Kensington Roof Gardens* and he wanted our cats to be part of it, as his collection of hats had a “*Leopard*” theme. So, we took a *Snow Leopard F2* and “*Sarez Zeus*” our *90% wild blood F1*, and they immediately became the centre of attention and stole the limelight from the models! Both cats behaved wonderfully, and at the end, Louis marched down the cat walk with our *Snow* galloping in front of him on a leash, unfazed by all the cameras flashing at him. They posed for the press at the end of the runway, and then each did a *dramatic twirl* and returned back stage amidst loud applause!

Meanwhile, “Sarez Zeus” was taken by model *Lady Emily Compton* to an awaiting Jaguar car and was photographed *holding him in her arms, and wearing an amazing diamond studded, gold leaf hat, for sale for £5 million – both complimented each other wonderfully, not just in beauty, but also because they are each the most costly of their kind!*

And after the show we mingled with the star studded audience, all of whom were entranced at the cats we were holding; amongst others, *Princess Ann and HRH Zara Phillips* spent half an hour speaking to, and gently stroking our very contented and relaxed felines.

I'm always so proud of the calmness of our cats at such events – *all the generations*. But we do work hard to rear them 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. In animals with *any* amount of wild blood, this intense socialisation is important as it creates kittens that are unafraid and affectionate, even when in the most difficult of environments.

And the results are evident; whilst meeting all the new people they've encountered, and during all the gala parties and functions 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. Their superb behaviour whilst being watched by so many, is not just a testament to how we rear our kittens, but also to the breed itself... and they form some of the reasons why the Bengal is now one of the most popular cats in Britain.

Our devotion to our cats has taken Sarah and myself on a journey; one that spans being in the press and on TV... a journey that has enabled us to help save abused animals, and to conserve some of the worlds most endangered felids...and during this journey, we have encountered so many different people, from all walks of life – and regardless of their wealth or status, they have become some of our dearest friends...

And it's all thanks to the magnificent Bengal cat. How humbling...



C. Esmond Gay

Sarez Bengals

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Dedicated to Boo Boo – my Son

Photos from top; (1) F2 Sarez Kitten, (2) Esmond Gay – Sunday Mail, (3) Rolf Harris & Sarez kittens, (4) Esmond Gay & Esther Rantzen, (5) Esmond Gay - Sunday Mail, (6) Lord Archer & Sarez kitten, (7) Sarez Bengals at Harrods, (8) Cindy Jackson & F2 “Sarez Cato”, (9) Jonathon Ross Family & Sarez kitten, (10) Louis Mariette & F2 Sarez Snow.

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 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 the beautiful felines that 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