



Wildlife Rehabilitation and Relocation

*Dedicated to limiting the further loss of Arizona's native birds of prey*

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## **For the Love of an Owl – How Wild At Heart Began**

In early 1990, while I was a volunteer at the Arizona Game and Fish Department's Adobe Mountain Wildlife Center, I read a delightful book "A Place For Owls" by Kay McKeever, a well known owl rehabilitator in Ontario Canada. The escapades of "Granny", a Spectacled Owl, and her first efforts at being a foster mom was hilarious, touching and inspiring. Excited by Granny's success at raising displaced owlets, Kay encouraged the use of non-releasable owls as surrogate parents for displaced owlets. Inspired by her success, I persuaded the Director to give me permission to initiate a foster parenting program at the Adobe Mountain Wildlife Center, as soon as a "suitable" bird was found.

A few weeks later, a severely ill, six-week old barn owl with permanent wing and leg injuries arrived at the Adobe Mountain facility. I was given permission to take it home and if it lived, try to make a foster parent out of it! On the way home, I hoped he would survive and that I'd be able to nurse him back to health. Sometime during our first days together, our eyes locked in a moment of pure magic. From there, a special love and commitment grew that still burns deep and strong. Little did I know that this pathetic looking owlet would drastically change our lives forever!

It soon became apparent that "Chia" would need prolonged medical care. The Wildlife center was not willing to spend their resources on one bird with no guarantee that he would survive. We took him to Dr. Irv Ingram, an experienced wildlife veterinarian, who offered to help. Chia was a fighter. Many times we thought he would not survive, but against all odds this little owlet did survive and grew into a beautiful young male.

My husband, Bob, built an aviary for him in the backyard of our former residence and we informally founded Wild At Heart. In 1991, as a single father, Chia raised his first group of 14 displaced nestlings! A gentle and devoted father to his adopted family, Chia became the avian forerunner of foster parenting in Arizona. His amazing example in turn inspired other rehabbers to utilize non-releasable birds and mammals as surrogate parents. Over the following eleven years, Chia and his mate, Tyta, would become foster mom and dad to hundreds of baby barn owls.

But Chia did not belong to us. He was legally held under the permits issued to the Adobe Mountain Wildlife Center and not ours to keep. Even though Chia was now "healthy", his wings and leg were forever compromised. He could not fly and he walked with a limp. In order for Chia to stay with us permanently, we would need to get special permits from the Arizona Game & Fish Department and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. Not an easy task and one that would require an enormous commitment from both Bob and I. Owls, as well as most other birds cannot legally be kept as pets. We would have to start our own rehabilitation organization and hope that Game and Fish would then transfer custody of Chia to us

By then, it was too late to turn back; a life long passion had begun. Wild at Heart was incorporated as a non-profit entity and we've dedicated our lives to caring for these wonderful creatures. Thanks, Chia, for the gift of yourself and for everything that has followed. We miss you more than you could ever imagine.

*Publisher's note: Our beloved Chia passed away on January 30th, 2002.*

***Optional...Tyta is still caring for foster owlets and has a new mate.***