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The WAO Files 4: Carol speaks. Sort of.

By Enrique Lopetegui
elopetegui@sacurrent.com

The following are some of the statements offered by Carol Asvestas and then-WAO attorney Eric Turton during and after an August 20 press conference at WAO's Leslie Rd. facility.

At the press conference

On the number of animal deaths (to Channel 12 producer Shari St. Clair): “Since 2005, nothing but misinformation, including your figures, have been circulated by somebody. That’s incorrect information. I have excellent staff. There should be absolutely no question about the care given to our animals. We get sick animals and we give them excellent facilities to live out their lives and they die here. Whatever information you get about 15 here or 20 [animal deaths] there is completely wrong. We give the USDA our inventory every single time [WAO’s veterinary is] asked. I have inventory on file. Because of this misinformation, the animals suffer the most. I’ve been here for 28 years and I’m not going anywhere, this facility is not going anywhere, and [the animals are] not going anywhere. We have nothing to hide here.”

On pictures of stool-filled cages: “We got a little paranoid when somebody started taking photos of the cages when we were cleaning up, and making it look like that’s what they were living in.”

St. Clair: Did the USDA ever cite you for anything?

Turton: “We have a complete settlement with USDA and there is no investigation going on.”

Alone with the *Current*

How has this affected you on a personal level?

Carol: “The stress of being almost (sic) accused of not doing your job properly is very disheartening. I think I’ve lost 80 pounds in the past... God knows how long, because I can’t do what I need to do on time to keep this place operating properly. I have to work overtime, fundraising, paperwork...”

You mentioned something about losing some donors...

“We went down in 2008 in donations, 2009 is not done. We had some will money donated which saved us.”

What about the dead animals? Dr. Ehrlund said she didn’t remember the exact

figure. How come you don't keep track?

We do. We have a whole file cabinet full of death certificates.

You knew we were coming...

I didn't think you would ask for anything besides Vi Vi.

Oh, c'mon...

Turton: "We were prepared to speak about Vi Vi.

Carol: "I want to show you something. Is it OK with you, Eric?"

(Turton agrees)

Turton: "We're trying to be transparent."

Carol shows me the death files and agrees to show them to me, "as long as it's OK [with Turton]."

Turton agrees but says that I have to make an appointment and he needs to be present. I made the mistake of agreeing, instead of demanding to see the files right away. Turton cancelled on me twice and then stopped returning my calls.

I found him at the County Courthouse on October 15, and asked him why he hadn't returned my calls after he promised to show me the files.

"I've been busy," he said.

On Sunday, October 18, I was supposed to meet with Ron and Carol Asvestas and their lawyer, Tammy Click (who is representing them in the lawsuit against daughter Nicole, WAO's board, and WAO itself), but my own daughter interrupted proceedings at 2:08 am: She wanted to come out of my wife's womb (she did; thanks). Carol Asvestas and Click were very gracious and understanding, so we agreed for them to send answers via email.

These are their replies:

What happened at the September board meeting where you and Ron were suspended, and subsequently terminated? What is your version of the meeting and events that followed?

The September meeting was called to order, and Sumner Matthes immediately made a motion to suspend Carol and Ron without pay. Carol and Ron were given no reason or opportunity to even question why this action was being taken. Then the directors placed Nicole García as the temporary CEO. These votes were three to one. The only person who voted no was board member Andrew Behaine. The board meeting was done solely by phone. No one was present in person. It was later discovered that the three board members who voted "yes" to the suspension and to place Nicole in the position had a secret conference call on Saturday to make these decisions. Therefore there was no opportunity for the other board members or Carol or Ron to ask any questions. On

Tuesday, Andrew Behaine and Chris [Morton] resigned from the board in protest. Then, the remaining three board members, the ones to participate in the secret phone call, voted on Thursday to terminate Ron and Carol's employment and remove Carol from the WAO Board of Directors.

How many sanctuary animals total, at both the Talley Road and Leslie Road locations, did WAO have in September, prior to your departure from the organization?

The WAO would have the records, but there were approximately 500 animals on both the Talley Road and Leslie Road locations, including the feral cats, feral pigs, and all the primates, birds and exotic animals.

What is the annual budget, how has it changed through the years, and what percentage goes directly to animal care and maintenance (including facilities specifically for the animals)?

The budget changes every year. The WAO took all the records, but the budget is made annually and shared with all the directors. The CPA makes a budget based on the actual figures from the year before. In 2009, on average, the cost to operate the WAO is approximately \$100,000 per month but, obviously, this average is dependent on many facts, including the commodity prices, electric costs, etc., many of which are dependent on weather and other circumstances outside of anyone's control. The costs for salaries are included in the budget, so this information should be available from the WAO.

We do have the information as to the salaries we have received from the WAO since Carol started the it in 1981. From 1981, for approximately 10 years Carol took no salary and Ron supported the WAO from his plumbing business. We obtained the property, made mortgage payments, water and electricity, built the pens, enclosures of all kinds, worked consistently. There was no salary taken from 1981 until the first salary for Carol in 1996 and that was \$11,770. The salaries, in round numbers, are as follows:

YEAR	CAROL	RON
1981- 1995	0	0
1996	11,770.00	1,200.00
1997	1,000.00	0
1998	33,000.00	24,000.00
1999	36,000.00	24,000.00
2000	0	0
2001	41,000.00	36,000.00

2002	47,000.00	44,000.00
2003	47,000.00	48,000.00
2004	47,000.00	50,000.00
2005	17,000.00	14,269.00
2006	53,000.00	54,000.00
2007	78,000.00	79,000.00
2008	74,000.00	74,000.00

The WAO was built by us, not for money, but because it was our passion and then after twenty years of work, our passion was able to become our livelihood. The WAO has documentation as to our job responsibilities and duties, and documentation that it would take three people to replace each one of us. I ask you to obtain these documents from them. Clearly this was not done by us for the money, and we are the only people we know who never get the salary they were told would be paid. Carol raised consistently over one million dollars every year for the past 4-5 years even in this economy. Fundraisers generally charge 25% and this is only one of the duties Carol was responsible for fulfilling.

According to records the *Current* has obtained, on 1/18/2007, at least four monkeys died. What was the cause of death?

The WAO can provide this information from the records. There would be a determination as to the cause of death made by the animal's doctor, so if you have records on the death you should have the records as to the cause of death.

You have consistently refused to open your animal records to the TCEQ, the *Current*, and others. Why the lack of transparency when you've been repeatedly challenged about the quality of animal care at WAO?

This is not a true statement. The TCEQ and Attorney General's office and others charged with any oversight have repeatedly stated that, during our term with the WAO, they received cooperation from us on all occasions. Why would you state otherwise? The complaints and investigations performed are available to the public pursuant to a Freedom of Information Act request. I encourage you to obtain proper information before making false accusations regarding our actions.

What happened to the pigs given to WAO with the expectation that an enclosure would be built for the animals? Can you prove that the pigs were relocated to new homes or sanctuaries, and not slaughtered?

Are you talking about the pot-bellied pigs given over ten (10) years ago ... in approximately 1999? Is this the most relevant question you have? Have you not been made aware of any of the facts? There has been information given to the Attorney's

General office years ago regarding this unfounded accusation. The short story is that we were told there were approximately 35 pigs, and when we arrived to pick them up there were approximately 90 pigs. There were not enough pens, especially as many of the females were pregnant and giving birth to other litters. The Attorney General's office was given the information and investigated this accusation and found no wrongdoing. Again, you are encouraged to get their investigation.

Is your plan to recover WAO and continue leading it, or do you want to claim the property and money and move on?

The WAO is an organization that has rules and procedures that govern its activities. If the governing rules and procedures are followed and it is determined by the directors that it is in the best interest of the WAO that we be dismissed, then we want the money and property owed to us and we wish them the best. If the WAO cannot meet its obligations, then we would consider retuning to make sure our life's work is not put in jeopardy.

According to TCEQ documents, WAO workers improperly disposed of deceased animals and animal waste on WAO property. How do you respond to those charges?

We understood that deceased animals and waste could be buried on the acres of property under the condition that it be buried deep enough that it could not easily be dug up. They were buried after digging a hole with the backhoe. Subsequently we learned that the dead animals were to be disposed of in the landfill, so we changed this practice. Frankly, we still believe that burying the animals ourselves would be preferable to dumping them in the trash. However, we abide by the instructions given by the TCEQ.

Why did you go into the wildlife-animal sanctuary field? What was your professional and academic background? Did you have any relevant experience working with animals prior to WAO?

The WAO was and is Carol's passion. She built it out of her own convictions. Carol and Ron built the WAO over a period of approximately 30 years from a dream into refuge for approximately 500 animals; from Carol's own donations into a refuge that requires a budget in excess of one million dollars.

A woman from Lansing, Michigan, claims that her October 2009 WAO newsletter, which was compiled and mailed before your departure, is exactly the same as the July 2009 newsletter. Is this the case, and if so, why?

This is a petty, ridiculous, trivial question that has no bearing on anything. Out of the tens of thousands of newsletters that go out every month some woman in Michigan gets the same one twice. So what? It is possible that she was on another mailing lists that would have been purchased and she would have received the same newsletter twice. But, again so what?

A [former] board member filed a complaint alleging that WAO's claim in 2005 to be caring for more than 300 animals orphaned by Hurricane Katrina was grossly exaggerated. Can you document that WAO in fact cared for these domestic animals?

See the WAO documents.

Can you prove that the tigers relocated from TOPS were adequately transported, with proper veterinarian care?

Can you "prove" they were not? For your information, there was a veterinarian and a team from the International Fund for Animal Welfare traveled to get the tigers and returned with the tigers.

Did the Asvestas ever make \$100,000/year each, or were those salaries ever discussed by the board?

Yes, a \$100,000.00 yearly salary for Carol and Ron was discussed and approved by the Board of Directors, including the three who terminated their employment. The WAO has the information as to the job descriptions and duties of Carol and Ron and the information on a projection to replace them and the associated cost which was approximately triple that amount. The WAO should be able to provide you with that information. However, Carol and Ron never received the promised salary and, frankly, any promised salary would not compensate for all the years when they worked for nothing and only put money and effort into the WAO. Unfortunately, it is my estimation that their work will only be recognized when it is too late. Even now, there is no one after 5 p.m. who checks on the animals. Carol and Ron would generally make a round in the evening and more than one if there was inclement weather as their house was on the adjoining two acres. It was a 24/7 occupation for them. But, they never missed making a payroll even if it meant no payment for them. This is just sad. Then to have their daughter on television taking credit for the change in the animal feed that Carol had spent so much time researching and working on. Do people honestly believe that a change in diet for such animals can happen in a period of a couple of weeks? And the tour groups that are being touted. Has insurance coverage been obtained to cover the WAO if someone gets hurt and sues? Carol couldn't find insurance coverage that the WAO could afford that would provide such coverage. Is it appropriate to have tour groups (invitees) and take the chance of a lawsuit without insurance coverage? Carol did not think so, perhaps the Board and new CEO does. Obviously, Carol and Ron are not perfect. No one is. And, like everyone else, they learned as they worked along, but they did the work. They built the WAO with assistance from many, many people, but none worked longer or harder than they did. But, it is the old story: No one will appreciate what they did until they are gone.

MANY OF THESE QUESTIONS HAVE GONE WAY BEYOND ANYTHING THAT IS RELEVANT OR APPROPRIATE.

After the upper case incident, I never heard back from Click or the Asvestas. The following are three unanswered questions emailed to Click on October 26:

1 – Just before being terminated by the board, did the Asvestas take files and equipment from the WAO offices? Please tell us your version of the story.

2 – I've seen pictures of a swimming pool being built at Ron Asvestas' house. Where did the money come from to buy the materials and pay for the workers?

3 – Why sue R.G. Griffing for libel and not others like rexano.org, Kristina Brunner, etc.?
Where did Griffing cross the line? What did he say/write that Brunner didn't? Is the
headline 'The Lyin' Queen' what did it? Is that all? When did he lie?

Posted by Kamikaze108 on 11/4/2009 11:42:42 AM