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## WAO: Still a Family Affair

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Late last week, Garcia was notified via email that she was fired by the board, though at the time she was also one of its three members, along with Sumner Matthes and Cryer, both longtime board members. Jamie Cryer, Michelle's husband and an experienced animal rescuer, was named acting director. He proudly affirms that he literally "changed the locks on her," in order to protect office documents and equipment. But Garcia wasn't the only one to go. The board, which filled Garcia's spot with Matthes' wife Elise, axed nine of the 17 employees, mainly office staff. "I didn't know anything about it, I was surprised," said Charlie Shamlin, the head of maintenance hired by Garcia last October, who was let go last weekend. "I knew there was some grumbling, but that's everywhere," he said. While showing us the Leslie Road tour facility "to [prove] the animals are still being cared for," Cryer said he would keep one maintenance staff person and intended to help with maintenance himself. However, Shamlin told us maintenance, which also addresses any requests from USDA inspectors, was a busy full-time job for him. "I had more work than I could do."

The abrupt terminations were in response to the dire financial straits in which WAO now finds itself. According to Cryer, WAO is at least \$100,000 in the hole. Former board member Kristina Brunner puts that figure closer to \$150,000. Michelle Cryer claims as a board member she never received any financial information from Garcia, and when she and her husband finally saw the books, they discovered much of the budget went to payroll instead of animal care for the more than 700 rescued wild animals on two sites in Northwest San Antonio. Just standing in the WAO offices on Thursday, we heard the fall-out of a bloated staff. "Who is she?" someone wondered looking at a staff sheet. "She was a Nicole hire. She came here after her day job. I think she worked in the gift shop?" someone else answered. "They were doing things backwards," said Cryer, "people came first and animals second." Cryer plans to put the savings from the firings toward animal food, at least a \$15,000 per month expense. Jenny Spellman, an animal care specialist at WAO, says the animals currently get red meat every other day, supplemented with chicken for big cats and dog food for wolves and bears. The several primates get "monkey chow" with as much produce as WAO can provide. She hopes additional money will go toward "enrichment" activities for the animals currently kept in modest wire enclosures

and additional pools to keep animals cool in summer. The new board retained the existing animal care staff and veterinarian, Dr. Ariana Finkelstein. Spellman, for one, agrees with the staff change, "it's going to make our jobs a lot easier, they're getting things handled in a lot more efficient ways." Garcia thinks the board will be in for a surprise when they try to divide the work of nine employees among the Cryers and the Matthes, who live in Florida. The WAO mailing list goes out to approximately 20,000 people and is a primary tool for fundraising the organization's \$1 million-plus income, in addition to events, tours and the constant maintenance needed to keep up the animal enclosures and habitats. The Cryers say that several thousand dollars from donors have come in during the past week alone. "We tried just a little bit," said Cryer. "The people before us, they didn't try at all."

That phrase, "people before us," or "prior management" (as Garcia refers to her parents) is a phrase heard frequently at Wild Animal Orphanage. Both Garcia and the Cryers agree that the Asvestas put their sanctuary in a troubling financial position that isn't easily remedied. Garcia said she was working on fundraising events but, "We were so far behind from prior management and things hitting us that we didn't know about." Those things included an unpaid payroll tax and USDA-required maintenance including tree removal and a new perimeter fence. Cryer bluntly says the Asvestas "thieved everything you could think of out of here." Self-described as retired, Cryer, 39, says he'll work for free as acting director on a temporary basis until "we get past the shitstorm." Garcia isn't so sure the board will be able to turn things around. Both Matthes and Cryer were board members during the Asvestas' tricky reign, and both Garcia and former board member Kristina Brunner find the Cryers' participation in WAO troubling. Garcia had at least one angry run-in with Cryer when he worked as an animal transporter for WAO. The Current received a forwarded email from a SMatthes account to Nicole and two other WAO stakeholders dated Oct. 30, 2009, recommending that Cryer be fired as a WAO volunteer and that, "it is time to ask Michelle Cryer to resign from the BOD and stop any further association with the WAO. It is obvious that she is not willing to work with us on our reorganization and change," said the e-mail. In a phone conversation with the Current a few days later, Matthes said "I have heard nothing but positive things on Nicole since she's taking over the operation as CEO. I have been in touch with her on a daily basis to determine if there are any real problems." The Matthes could not be reached for comment, but, assuming the email is valid, we're interested to see what changed their minds. The accusations levied against Garcia and her response are eerily reminiscent to those reported just six months ago when it was the Asvestases on the chopping block. Her biggest beef is that two-person board meeting could not have had a quorum to fire her, exactly the same argument her mother used when claiming only three board members moved to remove her and her husband. In her last email to the board, sent just two hours before she received notice that she was fired as CEO, Garcia wrote "you may recall last year we all had a long discussion that family members **should not** hold board positions at the same time because of the conflict of interest and appearance which was apparent under prior management."

For now, the Cryers are pleased with a recent (as in last week) USDA inspection and plan to implement a financial plan. Meanwhile, Garcia says "I'm going to be starting a new life and watching the animals from the outside."

Posted by Callie Enlow on 5/8/2010 11:05:53 AM

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