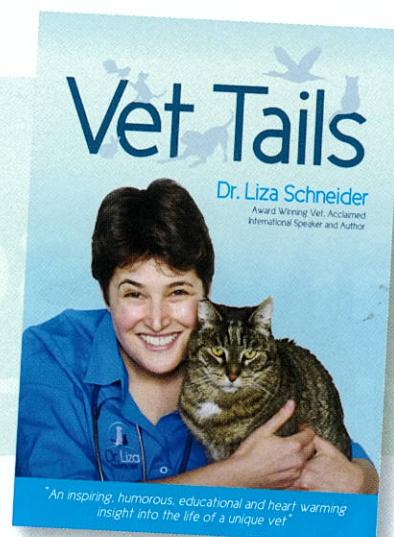


Vet Tails, a new book by veterinarian and regular *Animals' Voice* contributor Dr Liza Schneider (see page 20), is her story from growing up in Africa to the building of an award-winning and unique vet practice in New Zealand. For as long as she can remember, Liza always wanted to work with animals. In her book, she shares heart-warming, inspiring and occasionally agonising moments from her life as a vet. Here is an excerpt ...



My humble beginnings



African days ... my Mom stands with me ready to make sure the cheetah doesn't perceive me as prey size.

I LOVE BEING a vet! For as long as I can remember I have always wanted to work with animals and most of my earliest memories involve animals.

I grew up in South Africa, a majestic land rich in beauty with an abundance of wildlife. I loved learning about animals and their natural environment and was so fortunate to have my Dad, an active conservationist, facilitate intimate and inspiring interactions with wildlife from a young age.

We spent hours on game drives observing animals in their natural environment. I relished being so close to a wild African elephant that I could count its eyelashes, involvement with the rehabilitation of orphaned lion cubs, cheetahs, wild dogs, a baby hippopotamus and rhinoceros, eagles and vultures as well as witnessing breeding projects of endangered species and many more humbling experiences.

As a child I had a zoo of pets ranging from a gerbil I called Bear, a goose called Golda, our tortoise Archie, monkey Ikey, fish, a chameleon called Spike, hamsters, a range of aviary birds, rabbits, snakes, tadpoles, frogs, crabs and, of course, dogs and cats.

Understanding how things worked was important to me. One day when our monkey Ikey was allowed to run free around our house and garden we saw him "displaying amorous behaviour" with our cat Panther.

Shortly afterwards Panther became pregnant and my brothers and I waited anxiously to see what version of monkats would be delivered and were a bit disappointed with just a litter of gorgeous kittens. I knew that I needed to study further so that I could understand more about how this type of thing worked.

My Mom, a very gentle and kind lady who taught kids at nursery school (kindergarten), has always been patient with my fascination with animals, even when I insisted on keeping snakes as pets. She has a great love for all creatures but prefers to appreciate snakes from a good distance and ideally with at least one solid pane of glass in between.

Our maid Tatty (her real name was Katrina but since I couldn't pronounce it when I was little, Tatty she stayed), being a Zulu, had a real fear of snakes. Although Tatty always showed

interest in our animals, she kept her distance with my snakes while I studied them and did whatever I could to keep them in an enriched environment.

Although I initially had a fear of snakes too, I found that by learning about them and handling them my fear abated. Snakes make great pets, they don't need much cleaning or feeding but it can be difficult to purpose-build an enclosure they can't escape from.

My granddad Sonny, my role model due to his gentle, patient nature and always being there to help any human or animal that he could, also had the wonderful ability to make anything. He would spend hours working on lids for our fish tanks, aviaries for our birds and various other animal enclosures.

Unfortunately, the lid for my first snake enclosure needed progressive adjusting over the first few weeks since the resident egg-eating snake had the incredible ability of squeezing out of the tiniest holes.

I remember arriving home from school and panicking that the snake was gone, much to the horror of my Mom and Tatty who, despite their great discomfort in the process, would assist me in finding it again.

My Mom tells how she would look on the bookshelf, pull a book out, then look away, hope that the snake would be found but that she wouldn't have to be the one to see it there. Inevitably we would find the well-hidden snake but sometimes some of them would never be found and had no doubt found their way back into the wilderness or into Tatty's room for all we know.

In later years my youngest brother David, being seven years younger than me, had another egg-eating snake, much to the disappointment of my Mom and Tatty who must have breathed a sigh of relief when I no longer kept them as I was too busy playing sports.



My brothers and I being shown a marshall eagle in rehabilitation at Kruger National Park, one of Africa's largest game reserves.

He was a big snake for an egg eater and Davy, always the one with a terrific sense of humour, called him Jaws, naming him after his first girlfriend who talked a lot, he told us.

My younger brother Gav and I had a hamster breeding business. We supplied pet shops with baby hamsters after going through the process of using our stud hamster Snoopy to do his business with our four females and it made for some extra pocket money.

I would use mine to buy food for my birds while Gav used his to buy his fish and also more exciting things like video games and music tapes.

Snoopy was a lovely chap, fun to play with, calm and committed to his work. One day he succumbed to a parasite infection that made all of his beautiful white hair fall out, leaving him a pink and bare hamster. He looked like a bit of a scary creature being bare but thankfully this didn't stop him from being a happy chap and delivering his excellent stud duties.

Snoopy's offspring were always delightful and when they were weaned from their mothers before they were ready to go to the pet shop we used to love watching them run around their big cage with all the toys that



Giving a baby rhino a good scratch ... it was an orphan in rehabilitation at South Africa's Lapalala Wilderness School, where my Dad was involved in the establishment of an ecological education centre.

► we could think of providing including a hamster wheel on which they would run for hours.

Our border collie dog Gusto would be entranced by their activities and stand perched up next to their cage studying their every move. My Mom would say that she was studying them to write a thesis on hamster behaviour.

Gav was always more business-minded than me, making a commercial venture from the popcorn that our wonderful nanny Tatty would make us for school in the morning, dividing it into small bags and selling it to his schoolmates while I would share mine with my friends in class.

With our hamsters it eventually dawned on me that I was doing most of the legwork cleaning, feeding and caring for our pets while Gav seemed to have a share in the profits without doing much work.

I remember having a chat to my Dad, who has always been a good sounding board for business, and he suggested I buy Gav out. I took his advice but found that I wasn't making any headway getting Gav to oblige and went back to my Dad for his wise counsel.

My Dad said that he would speak to Gav and the deal went through but later in life I learned that the story was that my astute brother was just wanting to capitalise on his investment for as long as possible.

My business skills have always needed some work. When I was about 10 and walking through a flea market with my cousin Craig (just a bit older than me), he had his eye on a pair of sunglasses which were priced at 10 rand. But being good at bargaining, he was going to try to get the price down.

His opening line to the vendor was: "I've only got five rand," at which point I boldly interjected and said: "Don't worry, Cuzzy, I'll lend you the rest!"

Gav's tank of fish were of great pride to him but one day he arrived home to find one of them floating dead at the top. Upset but accepting that this happens with having fish he buried it (or flushed it down the toilet, I can't remember which) and enjoyed his others.

The next day, unfortunately, the same thing happened. He arrived home to find another of his fish dead and floating at the top.

It eventually transpired that while we

were at school, Davy had been fishing out Gav's fish, placing them on his toy cars and racing them down a ramp leading to their demise.

I later learned that this was a similar fate to that which my silkworms had met years before – I had found them sequentially curled up, turned yellow and dead because Gav had been racing them in his cars.

Our tortoise Archie, a handsome leopard tortoise weighing about five kilograms, would roam around our garden crunching on our succulents, lettuce and fruit that we would put out for him. Years later we had to change his name to Archina as he laid some eggs.

Unfortunately, our menagerie didn't always get along.

Our dog Whopper (a big mutt being a crossbreed of a mixture of most giant breeds of dog that you can think of) lived up to his name. What he had in brawn he lacked in brain. Whopper found a fascination with Archina so intense that from time to time he would not just observe her but actually scratch at her shell and sometimes damage it, requiring us to take her to the vet for some treatment.

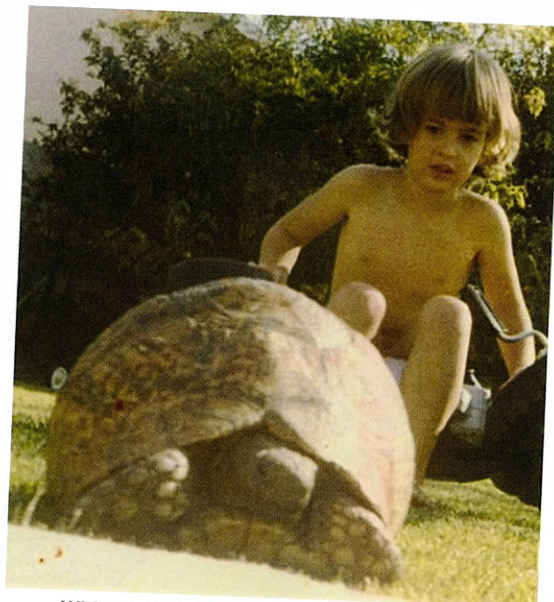
Archina sometimes fell into our swimming pool by mistake or sought refuge from Whopper by diving into the pool. This necessitated a rescue and my Dad would quickly jump in to retrieve Archina who, amazingly enough, was none the worse for this experience.

We were also always amazed to observe how Archina used to head for the highest point of our garden at certain times because he/she knew the rains were coming and wanted to be on higher ground.

My collection of aviary birds I found captivating. I used to watch them for hours ... how the canaries, being what we call in Afrikaans "loskop" (forgetful), would make their nests by collecting some grass from the floor, flying to their nest to add the grass but perched on the side they would suddenly remember that it was time for a visit to the food bowl and then drop their nesting material, eat some food and then again remember that they were in the process of building a nest and the cycle would resume.

With so many birds came the occasional drama like a baby cockatiel being mauled by a budgie that needed veterinary care; or my one canary, who came to be called Stompie (or Stumpy in English), when one morning we found that mysteriously half his leg was gone. Thankfully he was bright and happy otherwise and went on to live a full life as a handicapped canary.

At school I was known for my love of animals. Any injured or orphaned animal was generally brought to my attention and one day I was given a tiny



With our tortoise Archie, who later became Archina after laying eggs.

pink hatchling. Doubting that it would survive, I doted on it, keeping it warm and feeding it every couple of hours until I went to bed that night.

The following morning I was amazed to find it still alive and day by day it grew stronger and eventually grew enough feathers so that I could identify it as a baby bulbul, a garden bird with delightful character.

Given the little bird's voracious appetite I named him Guts and at the time I had no idea how he would truly live up to his name, or not as the case was ...

I would feed him mulberries and other fruit as well as flies that he would snatch as he spotted them on the wall in the yard from his perch on my finger. As he grew, he began to fly and so I set him up with an open cage that he could use as his base.

Each day when I returned home from school I would call and Guts would come flying from the surrounds and land on my head. On the weekend I set up his cage base outside my bedroom window which overlooked our swimming pool so that I could watch him and be close to him. He loved to bathe in the water bath that I provided, a ritual that I delighted in watching as it seemed to give him such joy.

One weekend I was working at my desk in my bedroom. It was a magnificent summer's day which meant that the dragonflies and butterflies would be out flying around our swimming pool.

Gusto, our border collie, would spend hours running around the pool chasing the dragonflies, trying to catch them but never to any avail. Guts had just had his bath and took off for a flight but his feathers were so saturated that he plummeted and Gusto was there to grab him with all her "dragonfly catching hype".

She bit his abdomen and in moments Guts was collapsed on the floor with his guts hanging out. I was devastated to say the least.

My Mom and Dad did their best to comfort me as Guts died in my hands and we chose a special place to bury him on which in the years to come, would grow a lovely mulberry tree.

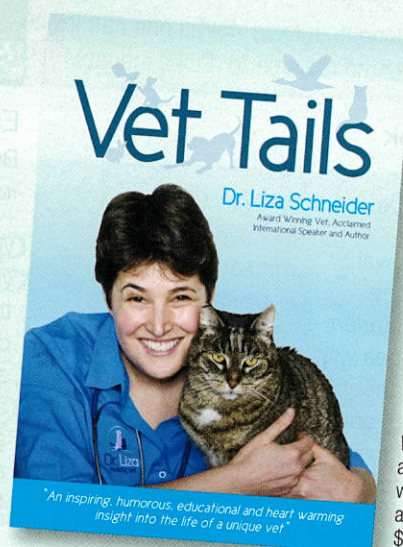
From that day I vowed that it was all very well to work with animals but the first thing that I needed to do was to learn how to help them and to heal them when they were sick and injured. I knew from that day that first and foremost I would become a vet. 🐾

WIN a signed copy of Dr Liza Schneider's book *Vet Tails*.

We have four signed copies of Liza's fascinating new book to give away to lucky readers.

TO ENTER the random prize draw, simply send us an envelope with your name, address and postcode written on the back. Post it to: Vet Tails Competition, Animals' Voice, PO Box 33609, Takapuna 0740 or email the same details under the subject line "Vet Tails Competition" to bruce@regatta.co.nz

Entries must be in by April 30, 2016.



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