

# FROM PONIES TO PANTHERS: JUDY BERENS AND PANTHER RIDGE CONSERVATION CENTER

By Britney Grover



Judy Berens and Charlie, the cheetah

On TripAdvisor's list of top things to do in Wellington, the International Polo Club and the Palm Beach International Equestrian Center stand fourth and fifth on the list. The top ranking goes to another animal-oriented locale, with claws instead of hooves — the Panther Ridge Conservation Center. But in a way, horses sparked the creation of Panther Ridge, and for a time even shared the property with the big cats.

For founder and director Judy Berens, life has always revolved around four-legged friends. Introduced to riding at a young age, Judy owned and showed horses for many years. She graduated from Vassar College and received an MBA from the University of Miami before moving to Wellington in 1994. Having a large equestrian property of her own enabled her to pursue another lifelong dream: working with large felines.

With the space and means to provide for an exotic cat, Judy began the time-consuming

permit process to become legally licensed to own one. Lots of paperwork and over 1,000 zoo volunteer hours later, Judy was fully equipped to adopt Sabrina the ocelot, her first exotic cat.

It was after obtaining her license that the calls began coming in: government agencies looking for a home for confiscated cats, humane societies looking for homes for abused or neglected animals, and more. Judy did what she could, whether it was helping to find a home for each feline or, soon enough, taking them in herself. Judy didn't have to search for cats in need of help; the need was there, and Judy was in a position to fill it. In 1999, Panther Ridge was born.

For many years, her property served as home to both exotic cats and Judy's horses. But as Panther Ridge grew, the paddocks and turnouts became enclosures such as the three-acre habitat of Charlie the cheetah. Cats have come to Judy and Panther Ridge from many different situations. Brandy, an 11-year-old cougar, was purchased illegally as a small cub to be a

family pet. As should have been expected, that didn't work out well and Brandy was sent to a sanctuary on the west coast of Florida, where she was ignored for seven years before that facility closed and she was taken in by Panther Ridge. She arrived scared, shy and so depressed that she didn't eat for a week. Now, she delights visitors to the Center with her purrs, chirps and curiosity.

Duma is a longtime resident of Panther Ridge. Now 18 years old, Duma is an African serval that has been at Panther Ridge for 16 years. His previous owner left him in a carrier behind a pet store in Ft. Lauderdale with a note asking them to take care of him. Since Duma was very obviously not a pet, the store had little idea what to do with him. Luckily, someone knew to contact Panther Ridge, who took him in immediately.

Judy's love for these felines is evident just by talking to her. "When a cat comes here, it's



for life,” she said. She and Panther Ridge are committed to caring for the big cats for the rest of their lives, so they’ll never again be at risk of neglect or mishandling, or in need of a home. “They become part of the Panther Ridge family,” she said.

As a not-for-profit, Panther Ridge relies on donations and money earned from tours to maintain the 17 cats currently living out their lives with customized habitats, diets, enrichment and love. Judy, who calls herself Panther Ridge’s “slave labor,” and her staff and interns who have been carefully chosen for their skill, knowledge and passion for helping cats, give tours of the facility to the public by appointment. Judy and Panther Ridge also serve as ambassadors for the wild conservation of the species who live there by donating a portion of funds received to carefully selected groups working to preserve the cats’ natural habitats.

For Judy Berens, what started as a unique pet has turned into a worldwide influence for saving lives — lives of majestic animals with four legs and claws.

To schedule a tour, make a donation or for more information, go to [PantherRidge.org](http://PantherRidge.org). 



Photos Clockwise from Top Right:  
Amos the black leopard

Macho, an ocelot, high in a tree

Phoebe, a caracal, and Duma, a serval

Brandy the cougar's favorite treat is watermelon!  
Photos courtesy of Judy Berens

