Dedicated China volunteer eventually adopts, now hoping for grand-panda kids

Description

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Carol Magidson and her adopted panda, Pang Niu, is now two-years old and living at the Bifengxia Panda Base reserve and research center. (Photo by Jan Robbins)

Carol Magidson, having no children of her own, adopted a giant panda. And someday, she hopes to be a grand-panda-parent.

In the late 1960s, Magidson and her mother went to London specially to see the giant pandas and became entranced. After many trips to China to visit and work in the panda reserves, Magidson,78, adopted her very own panda in 2017.

â??Adopting a panda in another country is a unique situation,â?• she said. â??But I feel a special affinity for these creatures and I want to see them thrive.â?•

Magidsonâ??s involvement with animals started a few years before she retired in 2001 at age 60. She was a volunteer at the San Francisco Zooâ??s Animal Resource Center, working with small animals. â??These animals go to schools and children can play with them, so we had to socialize them,â?• she said.

The position proved to be meaningful in more ways than one. â??I was a flight attendant for TWA and it was abruptly bought out by American. We were thrown into limbo,â?• she said. â??It was lucky I had my volunteer position. It was grounding for me.â?•

Walking the ferrets and possums

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In the morning, volunteers would do the â??dirty workâ?• â?? clean out the cages, disinfect them, and put them back together. In the afternoon, they would walk the animals. â??I walked ferrets and possums. No walking for the chinchillas and hedgehogs.â?•

Magidson loved engaging with the animals and did so for another 14 years. But by age 75, it was too physically demanding. â??They wanted eight hours a day on your feet. After my hip replacement, I couldnâ??t stand that long. I had to look around for something else.â?•

Today, she walks small dogs as a volunteer at Muttsville, a rescue organization for senior dogs that only requires a commitment of three hours a week. Still, even while helping at Muttsville, she kept thinking of the giant pandas.

She had kept up with them by watching PBS documentaries and following the news. In 1972, the Chinese government gave two giant pandas â?? Ling Ling and Hsing Hsing â?? to the Smithsonian National Zoo to commemorative President Nixonâ??s visit. They were the first to reside in an American zoo. Currently, giant pandas live in Zoo Atlanta in Georgia, the San Diego Zoo and the Memphis Zoo in Tennessee. These zoos participate in the Giant Panda Species Survival Plan overseen by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In 2007, Magidson got to be with the pandas in person. Panda reserves in China are not open to the public. She was able to visit by booking a four-day tour called â??Pet-A-Pandaâ?• with Keith Jones, who conducts animal tours all over the world. â??We cleaned the indoor and outdoor enclosures. I was used to cleaning up after animals from my time working at the San Francisco Zoo.â?•

And luckily, she got to witness the birth and survival of baby panda twins. â??In the wild when twins are born, the mother will pick the strongest one to feed and care for. It is impossible for her to care for both,â?• Magidson said. â??The panda experts were able to successfully switch the babies out, so the mother could feed both. That was thrilling.â?•

Giant pandas are native to south central China, where their name means â??large bear cat.â?• They live in remote, mountainous regions in high bamboo forests that are cool and wet. At five ounces, a newborn panda is the size of a stick of butter. Females grow to between 150 to 220 lbs. and males up to 330 lbs.

This peaceful, solitary creature is easily recognizable by the large, distinctive black patches around its eyes, over its ears, and across its round body. In the wild, giant pandas live between 15 and 20 years, and in captivity up to 30 years. They are skilled tree climbers and efficient swimmers.

A life of mostly eating

But they spend most of their day eating. A typical giant panda eats for a full 12 hours out of 24 and relieves itself dozens of times a day. â??Itâ??s a good thing they are vegetarians,â?• Madigson said, â??because their poop doesnâ??t smell, and we have to shovel a lot of it!â?•

A big part of the volunteersâ?? job is to prepare their food â?? cut up the panda bread into proportionate pieces, wash and cut carrots and apples, and cart the bamboo. â??The pandas are very polite when we feed them, and wait patiently for their food,â?• she said.

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During her next trip, in 2009, she worked in the nursery. â??This was the only time I got to go into the nursery. It was amazing to see the little ones.â?•

Magidson went back to China with Jones in 2011, 2013 and 2014. In 2015, there was an outbreak of dysentery in one of the reserves and five pandas died. â??After that volunteers were not allowed to pet the pandas, which was a great loss as we couldnâ??t really see their personalities from behind the cages.â?•

And Jones had to stop his tours due to a tragedy in the family. So Magidson signed on with Pandas International for a two-week cultural tour in China and a panda work program at the Bifengxia Panda Base reserve and research center. It was during this stay that she decided to adopt a panda. The tour cost $3,500 which included everything but the adoption, which cost $1,000 to adopt a panda the first year. After that, the yearly renewal fee is $800.

At the time, there were two 11-month old pandas to choose from. â??Everyone else wanted the panda whose name meant â??First Love,â?• she said, â??but I chose Pang Niu. She was the largest female panda they had ever seen. Her name means â??Fat Girl.â??â?•

Pang Niu is now two-years old, and Magidson plans to continue supporting her. Her great hope is that, in four to five years,â?• I will have â??grand-pandas.â?•

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