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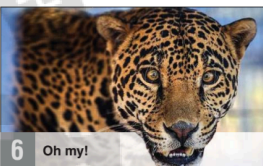
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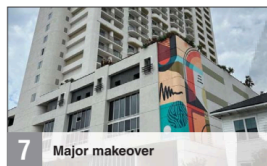
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Lions Tigers & Bears Claws Out Niche as Animal Sanctuary

NONPROFITS: Launches K-5 Field Trip Curriculum, Summer Programming Featuring Saved Exotic Pets

■ By MADISON GEERING

ALPINE—Bobbi Brink moved to Texas in the 1990s to open a restaurant. She did not expect to enter the world of exotic animal trade.

Always an animal lover, Brink saw ads in the paper selling lions, tigers, leopards and more. Brink was intrigued and began volunteering for a few of the sellers—she quickly learned that the businesses were not what they seemed.

"From being on the inside, you see it's not [legitimate], and you see what the animals go through... How the babies are yanked from the mama," Brink said. "After working with the guy with bears, I saw how badly his bears were treated."

"I tried to turn that man in to everybody I could — the sheriff, the local county, animal control, the Humane Society — and everyone said the same thing: 'It's legal. Nothing could be done, as long as the animals had food and water,'" she continued.

After witnessing such cruelty, Brink founded animal sanctuary and nonprofit **Lions Tigers & Bears** in 2002, which is now Southern California's only **Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries** accredited facility. Since its founding, the organization has grown to house over 60 exotic animals, 25 employees and over 100 volunteers. Its budget is about \$5 million as of 2024.

An Invisible Issue

Wildlife trafficking is an \$8 billion to \$10 billion industry annually, making it the fourth largest illegal trade behind narcotics, human trafficking and counterfeit products, according to a 2024 brief by the **University of Nevada**,



Lions Tigers & Bears CEO and founder Bobbi Brink (pictured center right) received a call from New York Department of Environmental Conservation officials in 2014 and assisted with their orders to seize three exotic animals being kept at a private residence. Photo courtesy of Lions Tigers & Bears

Las Vegas.

"You don't know until you see it," Brink said.

"Especially in San Diego, you don't see the exotic animal trade, even knowing we have the biggest ports in Southern California and huge wildlife trafficking... A lot of animals come through the Long Beach port and our borders

[One of our] tigers was caught under the floorboards of a car coming across the border."

Lions Tigers & Bears works with local law enforcement around the country to rescue, relocate and rehabilitate animals who have fallen victim to trafficking. Brink said that the nonprofit's work is essential since law enforcement

is not trained on how to transfer exotic animals. The Lions Tigers & Bears team travels onsite to help with animal rescue, utilizing their semi-truck, trailers or self-contained animal hauler which is temperature-controlled and barred.

At times, Lions Tigers & Bears will get calls from individuals who took exotic animals in as a pet but were "in over their head," said Brink.

"A lot of times the animals find us," Brink said. "Our biggest need is to build more habitats, because not any one place can take all of the rescued animals."

Lions Tigers & Bears helped with rescues in the popular **Netflix** docuseries "Tiger King," which explored the exotic animal trade. Two female tigers from the show, Jem and Zoe, now reside at the nonprofit's Alpine habitat.

Educating Future Generations

This summer, Lions Tigers & Bears launched a new accredited K-5 curriculum to accompany school field trips to its sanctuary. Brink hopes that the curriculum will support the nonprofit's mission and bring the community closer to its work.

The organization's summer lineup of programs also includes member-for-a-day experiences, guided educational tours, behind-the-scenes experiences and an overnight immersive experience. The sanctuary also operates as an event venue.

"Education is key," Brink said. "The young people will take this over and decide if we're going to keep animals in cages and captivity and continue to breed them or make the decisions to help stop actual wildlife trafficking

► *Lions page 39*

'We Want Kids Excited about Nature'

NONPROFITS: San Diego River Park Foundation Opens \$13M The River Studio at Grant Park

■ By MADISON GEERING

SAN DIEGO—After over a decade of work, **San Diego River Park Foundation** (SDRPF) CEO, President and co-founder **Rob Hutsel** is excited to see local kids' eyes light up at the organization's new \$13 million educational facility **The River Studio** at Grant Park.

"Seeing that sense of awe in people's smiles—that's why we're here," Hutsel said. "This is what we're trying to do. Every time I see a kid or a family that has that moment, that's my inspiration."

Since 2001, SDRPF has dedicated itself to restoring the San Diego River and integrating it with the community. With the completion of the 1,200 square foot River Studio, the organization hopes to reach 10,000 kids annually with its Cool River Education Program, which has doubled in size with the new facility.

River Studio will feature an indoor space for digital microscopes, aquariums, remote sensing equipment and other technology. The studio is located at the recently completed Grant Park, which is situated on 17 acres of land donated by the Grant family over a decade ago.

SDRPF's annual budget is \$1.8 million, and the organization is anticipating about 20% growth over the next year.

"The whole concept of Grant Park and the River Studio is to find meaningful ways for the kids to connect to and have that sense of wonder and awe for nature," Hutsel said. "We do it through learning. We do it through technology. We do it through really close-up, personal experiences."

Over ten years ago, when the Grant family gifted SDRPF the 17 acres of land, it was



San Diego River Park Foundation CEO Rob Hutsel has prioritized youth education in the organization's work since helping found it in 2001. Photo courtesy of San Diego River Park Foundation

worth \$11 million. After initiating the development of the property, it took about five years to secure a permit for Grant Park and the River Studio. At that point, the project was originally estimated as a \$5 million endeavor.

The Journey to Completion

As the project's design evolved, it became more expensive. SDRPF raised \$13 million for the project, mostly sourced from private philanthropy. About \$3 million of the budget came from public grants.

Due to cost, the project was divided into phases: phase one was grading and public access improvements, and phase two was the recently completed construction.

About a year and a half ago, SDRPF almost decided to cancel the construction of the River Studio because costs had risen dramatically during the pandemic. With an extended timeline, however, the organization was able to complete the studio, a "critical piece of the overall vision," said Hutsel.

Once its last permit is approved, which is anticipated soon, SDRPF will welcome youth through River Studio's doors.

"We want kids excited about nature," Hutsel said. "I want them to understand that nature is super cool—that nature and the river, in particular, is something we should value, treasure and respect."

SDRPF has committed that over 80% of participating students will be from Title I schools, traditionally underserved communities and that programs will be offered at no cost to students or schools. Closing the opportunity gap for youth in STEM is a priority at

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JULY 28, 2025

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Jamul Casino

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The resort takes a high-tech, gaming-inspired approach to hospitality, emulating tribal history and culture. Among its most notable amenities are the luxurious Jamul Spa, vibrant rooftop Starlite Pool and speakeasy lounge Fly Room.

Over 350 new jobs were created with the completion of the resort, which was developed with C.W. Driver and JCJ Architecture.

"It's really a boutique hotel designed by players for players," Malloy said. "All the elements of the hotel, whether it's the speakeasy or the spa, are really catered to our gaming customers."

Diversifying Revenue

With the opening of the resort, Jamul is more focused on increasing gaming revenue than overall volume of visitors. Since the casino now offers a place to stay, Malloy said that the destination can attract players from drive markets further away, many of whom have a larger budget for gaming.

"It changes the type of customer we can attract now," Malloy said. "San Diego is a big gaming market. There are 10 competitive casinos between East County and North County. We're the only one without a hotel. That keeps our business model hyper local. The hotel changes that for us, because now visitors can spend the night."

"So we can get a lot more high-profile guests from North County, Orange County, all the way up the Temecula pipeline up the I-15," he continued. "The prospect of getting new gamers in the door is going to be huge to us."

Jamul, like others in the hospitality industry, has struggled with rising costs. However, Malloy said that the company tries its best not to push the burden onto customers and hopes to fade the impact with growth in revenue from the new hotel.



Jamul Casino Resort's amenities include the rooftop Starlite Pool. Photo courtesy of Jamul Casino Resort

Within the past few months, many local destinations have seen a decrease in international travel and pivoted marketing efforts to drive market tourists. Malloy said that faltering international travel is more harmful for bigger destinations. Jamul already primarily caters to a drive market of visitors, so the trend has had little impact on the casino resort.

Designed to earn AAA's Four Diamond designation, each room in the resort is equipped with a tablet-based DigiValet control system and Alexa voice command capabilities with multilingual support. LUCI Systems provides in-room multimedia entertainment enhancements.

"We feel like we're cutting-edge," Malloy said. "The only other casino in the United States that employs DigiValet and LUCI Systems is the Wynn Las Vegas."

Forging Jamul's Future

Before Jamul opened in 2016, the tribe struggled financially for decades, said Jamul Indian Village Chairwoman Erica Pinto.

"My mom, my dad and my uncles grew up on this reservation," Pinto said. "When you look at past pictures, and then you look at

the present state of Jamul – it's so different. It's gone through so many phases. We know what it was like to have nothing and have limited, minimal, or no resources to survive. There were not very many opportunities for my people."

Having a casino at all inherently gives back to the tribal community, Pinto said. Not only does it provide jobs and revenue for the tribe, but it also contributes funds to the California Revenue Sharing Trust Fund (RSTF). The RSTF is a sum of money that California tribes with gaming businesses contribute a percentage of their revenue to, varying based on earnings.

RSTF funds are redistributed to limited or non-gaming tribes in order to provide economic support.

With revenue from Jamul, the tribe was able to purchase over 170 acres of land, monumentally expanding on the six acres they had before. Through the Jamul Indian Village Land Transfer Act in 2024, the land was put into trust for the tribe and will be developed in coming years to accommodate housing, administrative offices, a health clinic, grocery stores and other community resources.

The tribe's old community center used to stand where the new hotel currently resides. As the tribe develops its land, rebuilding the community center is a top priority.

"The mission of the tribe [and the casino] is to make sure that our people are cared for and have opportunities," Pinto said. "If you have that foundation of good, healthy employees and good, healthy tribal members, you can continue to grow." ■

Jamul Casino Resort

FOUNDED: 2016
PRESIDENT: Mary Cheeks
HEADQUARTERS: San Diego
BUSINESS: Hospitality and Gaming
EMPLOYEES: 1,450
REVENUE: Growth of employment - 1,450 current employees is a 20% increase over the 1,200 team members the team had previously
WEBSITE: jamulcasino.com
CONTACT: jamulcasino@kirvindoak.com
NOTABLE: The \$430 million casino has nearly 1,700 slot machines, 46 live table games and a dedicated poker room.

Transposon

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opportunities," Podlesak said.

Addressing Common and Rare Diseases

More than 7 million U.S. residents have Alzheimer's-related dementia, while researchers at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated earlier this year that the number of people living with ALS in the U.S. is expected to grow from roughly 32,800 in 2022 to 36,300 by 2030.

PSP is a brain disease that damages cells in parts of the brain that control functions like

walking, balance, eye movement and swallowing. It's far more rare than Alzheimer's or ALS – an estimated 5 out of every 100,000 people have been diagnosed – and less understood than the other two diseases.

As such, according to Podlesak, there are no drugs approved to treat PSP on the current market.

"The market opportunity for an approved drug is probably north of \$2.5 billion in the U.S. alone," he said. "It's a very high area of medical need – again, no treatment options for these patients – and we are now working through potential next steps with the FDA, but Transposon is fully committed to addressing PSP."

Podlesak described Transposon as a "big

idea company" in its focus on reverse transcriptase and the dark genome – the 98% of the nuclear genome that doesn't encode for proteins or, until recently, was believed to have any utility as a target for therapeutic drugs.

"We're being very laser focused on indications where we've generated data and feel that we have a very disproportionately high probability of success in these really tough indications," he said.

"But we would get very excited with positive results, because I think it would further solidify the view of the dark genome and this novel target having much broader application," he added. "And that's the big idea and hope, that Transposon could have a profound impact across multiple other disease areas." ■

Transposon Therapeutics, Inc.

FOUNDED: 2019
CEO/CHAIRMAN: Dennis Podlesak
HEADQUARTERS: San Diego
BUSINESS: Drug development to treat neurodegenerative and aging-related diseases
EMPLOYEES: Roughly 25
WEBSITE: transposonrx.com
CONTACT: Inquiry@TransposonRX.com
NOTABLE: Podlesak is the managing partner of venture capital firm Canaan Partners' Axcellis LLC, a "company creation vehicle" that is the largest investor in Transposon.

Lions

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and abuse."

Like many nonprofits, Brink said that Lions Tigers & Bears is experiencing challenges with funding support. With community engagement and dedication to its mission, Brink said that the organization is going to "make it work."

Lions Tigers & Bears generates funding through fundraising, event offerings, social media and its annual gala. The sanctuary's next capital campaign will be a multi-million-dollar animal hospital and an approximately \$1.5 million big animal habitat, both of which are projected to launch by the end of the year.

"That's kind of how we've built this place — one habitat at a time, one animal at a time," Brink said. ■



In Orange County during April of 2021, an educational facility decided they no longer wanted to care for their animals and reached out to Lions Tigers & Bears for help placing them. Lions Tigers & Bears CEO and founder Bobbi Brink is pictured right pushing the animal's cage. Photo courtesy of Lions Tigers & Bears

Lions Tigers & Bears

FOUNDED: 2002
CEO: Bobbi Brink
HEADQUARTERS: San Diego
BUSINESS: Nonprofit Animal Sanctuary
EMPLOYEES: 25
REVENUE: \$5,892,811.02 (2024)
WEBSITE: https://www.lionstigersandbears.org/
CONTACT: Inquiries@lionstigersandbears.org
SOCIAL IMPACT: The most significant social impact of Lions Tigers & Bears Sanctuary in Alpine, CA is its powerful role in educating the public about the cruelty of the exotic animal trade while fostering compassion and responsible behavior toward wildlife.
NOTABLE: Bobbi Brink and Lions Tigers & Bears played a key role in the rescue and transfer of 69 big cats from Tiger King Park, made infamous by the Netflix docuseries. Two of those tigers, Jem and Zoe, now live happily ever after at the sanctuary.