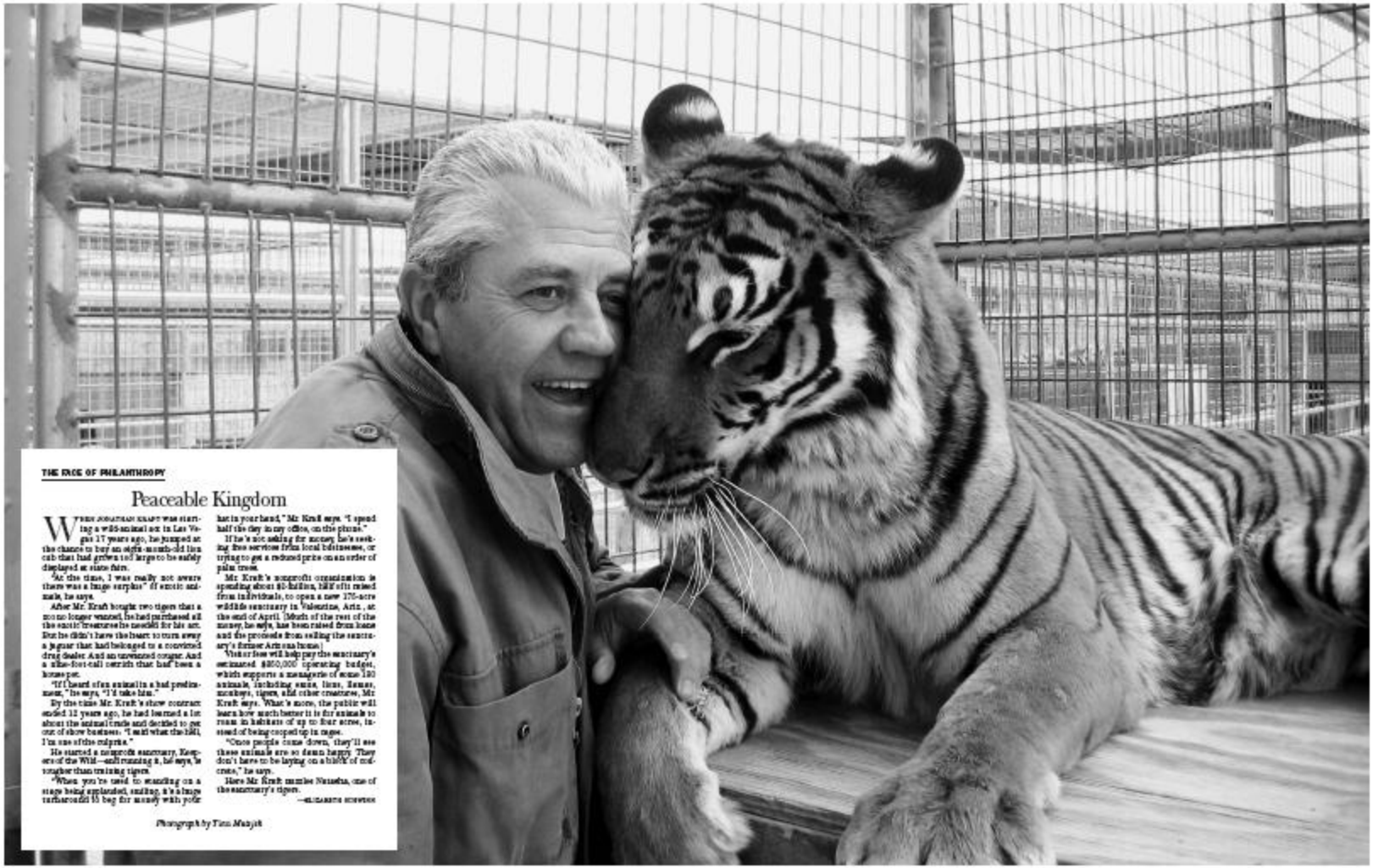

THE FACE OF PHILANTHROPY

Peaceable Kingdom

When Jonathan Kraft was starting a wild-animal act in Las Vegas 17 years ago, he jumped at the chance to buy an extra-mouth-old lion cub that had grown too large to be safely displayed at state fairs.

"At the time, I was really not aware there was a huge surplus" of exotic animals, he says.

After Mr. Kraft bought two tigers that a zoo no longer wanted, he had purchased all the exotic creatures he needed for his act. But he didn't have the heart to turn away a jaguar that had belonged to a convicted drug dealer. And an unwanted cougar. And a nine-foot-tall ostrich that had been a horse pet.

"If I heard of an animal in a bad predicament," he says, "I'd take him."

By the time Mr. Kraft's show contract ended 12 years ago, he had learned a lot about the animal trade and decided to get out of show business. "I said what the hell, I'm one of the culprits."

He started a nonprofit sanctuary, Keepers of the Wild—still running it, he says, is tougher than training tigers.

"When you're used to standing on a stage being applauded, smiling, it's a huge embarrassment to beg for money with your hat in your hand," Mr. Kraft says. "I spend half the day in my office, on the phone."

If he's not asking for money, he's seeking free services from local businesses, or trying to get a reduced price on an order of palm trees.

Mr. Kraft's nonprofit organization is spending about $5 million, half of it raised from individuals, to open a new 175-acre wildlife sanctuary in Valentine, Ariz., at the end of April. (Much of the rest of the money, he says, has been raised from lease and fee proceeds from selling the sanctuary's former Arizona home.)

Visitor fees will help pay the sanctuary's estimated $850,000 operating budget, which supports a menagerie of some 180 animals, including emus, lions, llamas, monkeys, tigers, and other creatures, Mr. Kraft says. What's more, the public will learn how much better it is for animals to roam in habitats of up to four acres, instead of being cooped up in cages.

"Once people come down, they'll see these animals are so damn happy. They don't have to be laying on a block of concrete," he says.

Here Mr. Kraft cuddles Natasha, one of the sanctuary's tigers.

—ELIZABETH GREENE

Photograph by Tina Manjik

Peaceable Kingdom

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If he's not asking for money, he's seeking free services from local businesses, or trying to get a reduced price on an order of palm trees.

Mr. Kraft's nonprofit organization is spending about $2-million, half of it raised from individuals, to open a new 175-acre wildlife sanctuary in Valentine, Ariz., at the end of April. (Much of the rest of the money, he says, has been raised from loans and the proceeds from selling the sanctuary's former Arizona home.)

Visitor fees will help pay the sanctuary's estimated $350,000 operating budget, which supports a menagerie of some 130 animals, including emus, lions, llamas, monkeys, tigers, and other creatures, Mr. Kraft says. What's more, the public will learn how much better it is for animals to roam in habitats of up to four acres, instead of being cooped up in cages.

"Once people come down, they'll see these animals are so damn happy. They don't have to be laying on a block of concrete," he says.

Here Mr. Kraft nuzzles Natasha, one of the sanctuary's tigers.

—ELIZABETH SCHWINN

Photograph by Tina Matejek