



GROWLING ARTISTS

CEDARHILL'S RESIDENT LIONS MAKE ART FOR FUNDRAISER

Sharon Dickerson is on her knees, squirting paint onto squares of canvas, while a lion paces a few feet away.

It's a muggy, early August evening. Thunder rumbles occasionally in the distance, a precursor for heavy rains that would move through hours later. The lion, a female named Nombi, eventually flops down, pressed up against the chain link fence separating her from the woman and her paints.

She still watches, though, tail flopping impatiently.

Eventually the six 11-by-17-inch canvases, held to the floor of the pen by bright green tape, are splattered with paint, swirls in all kinds of colors. Dickerson – a board member at Cedarhill Animal Sanctuary – and Dawn Brock, the general manager, who has been helping her set up, spray the canvases with lavender scent and retreat.

The lioness, joined by Tafari, a big male, gets much more interested as the smell spreads. They begin pushing and shoving, each jockeying for position to get inside. When Brock opens the door, it's Nombi that scrabbles in.

Tafari and his other sister, Jala, eventually enter their own enclosures. The big cats roll around

on the canvases, claw them, swish them with their tails. Eventually they get bored and Brock lets them out and back into the fenced pasture where they live.

The bright splashes of color on the cats, while striking, don't last long. The non-toxic paint comes off easily when the cats bathe, or in the rain, Dickerson explains.

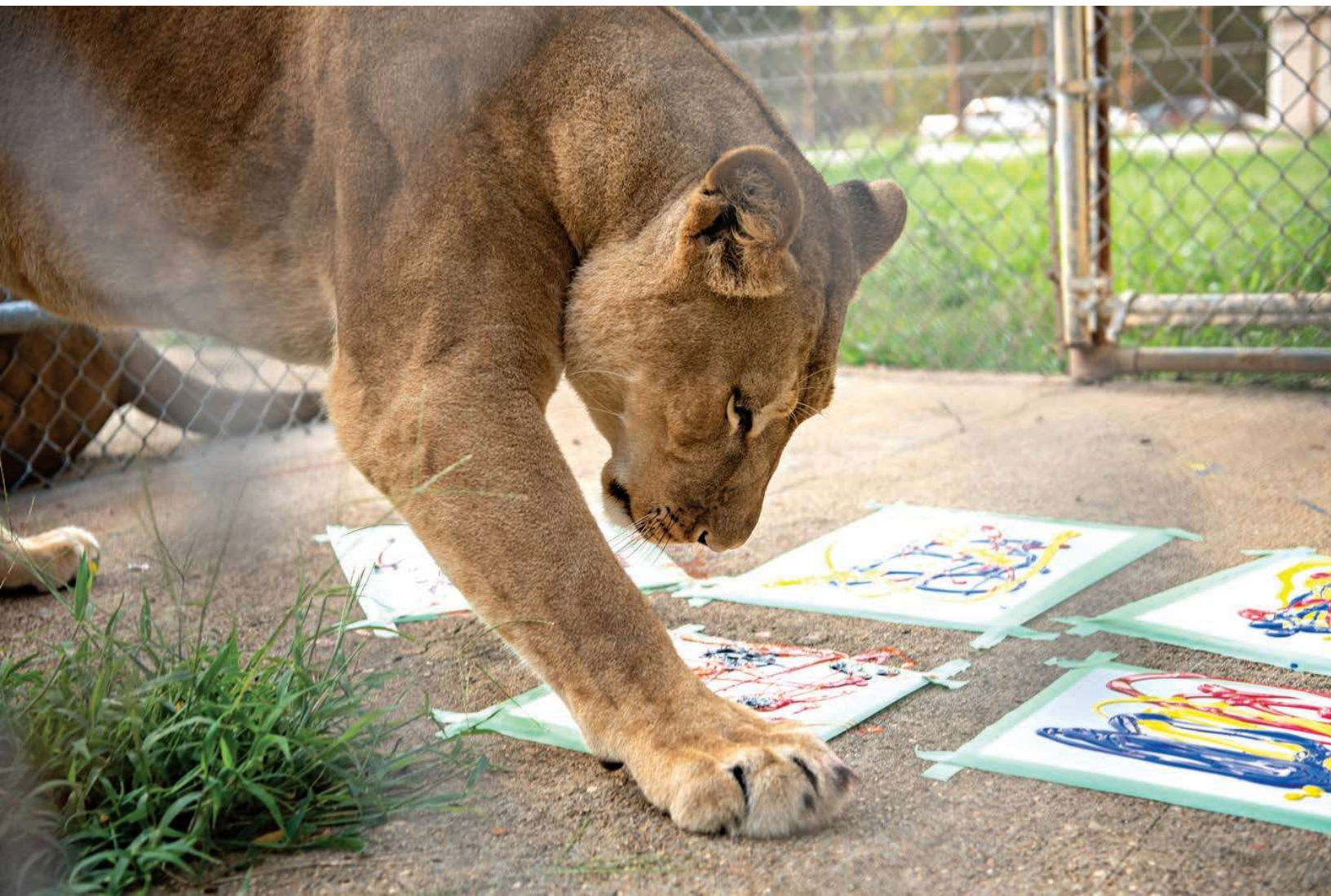
Dickerson and Brock carefully pull up the remaining canvases, which range from clouds of violently colliding pigments to what would probably happen if Jackson Pollock got into Asian calligraphy. All in all, a pretty good evening.

Strange? Sure. But, according to Dickerson, enrichment activities like painting are vital for the big cats.

"It's art therapy," Dickerson said. "A lot of the exotics were abused, and working with a caretaker every day helps them to heal stress from the humans who hurt them."

ABOUT CEDARHILL

Cedarhill, one of the oldest sanctuaries in the nation, sits on about 25 acres near Caledonia and houses nearly 200 animals. In addition to its three lions, five tigers, four bobcats and a cougar, it also houses dogs, cats, horses and even birds



and pigs. All of the “exotics” get enrichment activities of various sorts.

According to Cedarhill Executive Director Nancy Gschwendtner, “probably 98 percent of them” were abused. All of the animals have to be housed and fed and sent to the vet. There are also about 15 employees who need to be paid. All of that adds up to about \$60,000 a month right now. Like seemingly everything else, expenses have gone up over the past couple of years.

“Before the pandemic, it was maybe \$50,000 a month,” she said. “That’s a lot of money to come up with every single month. It’s getting tougher and tougher.”

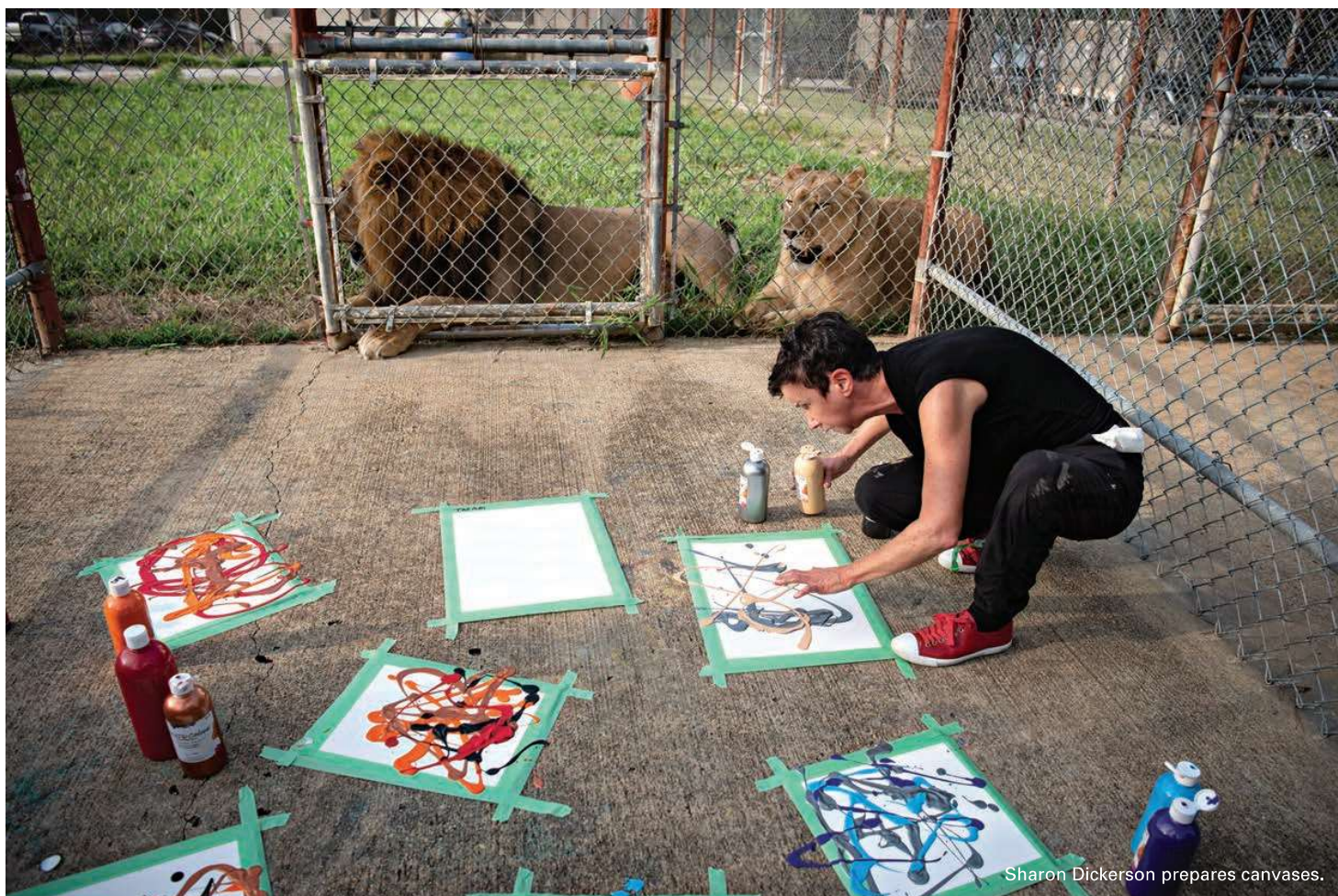
“As a nonprofit, you have to look for ways to

make money,” she said. “We get no grants from the government. Nothing. It’s people like you and me who are giving those donations.”

The sanctuary is not open to the public, and it doesn’t adopt animals out, both of which makes it harder to fundraise.

RAISING FUNDS WITH THE ART

While painting enrichment is common at animal sanctuaries, this year Cedarhill is planning on doing something new. In December, about 75 of the big cats’ paintings – some small, some large – will be up for sale in a gallery showing at the Rosenzweig Arts Center in downtown Columbus.



Sharon Dickerson prepares canvases.

The animals will be treated like artists at any other gallery opening, with pictures and biographies, Dickerson said. The exhibit will be as inclusive as possible, including recordings of voice actors – volunteers from Golden Triangle Community Theater – reading the biographies in-character.

The hope is the show will bring more exposure to Cedarhill, said Gschwendtner. Dickerson said next year she



hopes to expand the show to other museums around the state to cast the net wider and, hopefully, create a reliable revenue stream.

She hopes the fundraiser will net enough money to expand the enrichment activities for the big cats.

“There’s a lot of equipment out there they can play with,” she said. “It’s like buying playground equipment for big cats, and it would be really

nice if we were able to have extra funds to put towards that. And of course there’s always the need to have funding beyond that.”

If paintings aren’t your thing, there are other ways to help.

“You can donate straight from our Facebook page,” Gschwendtner said. “You can also get on our mailing list. We’re not going to send you 15 letters saying, ‘Oh, my God, we’re dying if you

