

Animal Heroes: an inside look at the first GFAS certified farm sanctuary in South America

In July 2020, amidst a global pandemic, Juliana's Animal Sanctuary became the first GFAS certified farm sanctuary in South America. As the only animal sanctuary in Colombia, Juliana's Sanctuary faces difficult odds, at a cultural and political level. And yet, Juliana Castañeda Turner, Founder and Director of Juliana's Animal Sanctuary, displays the tenacity and heroism she so admires in her residents. We interviewed her to see what it's really like to pioneer the sanctuary life on your own terms.

Tell me the story about how you started the sanctuary. What got you into rescuing animals?

Like all kids, I love animals. I always saw them as my equals but in different bodies. One day, when I was just five years old, I learned about animal abuse, and at that moment, I stopped eating them.

I knew I had to do something to help animals, but I was just not sure what. But then something happened when I was age 11. One day, my teacher asked me what I wanted to do with my life, and right at that moment, I knew -- I needed to build a big home to save the animals!

I started the sanctuary at age 24. It might sound crazy, but I was dreaming all those years that I would have a big place to protect "all" the animals. Throughout my schooling, I saved every penny I earned to make this dream real. My friend, Ekala and I pooled our funds together and bought a small plot of land, and that is how we started the first sanctuary for "farm animals" in Colombia.

In the beginning, we only had protected dogs, but then Gita and Balaram arrived, the first protected and free cow and bull in the country. We educated ourselves by reading about other sanctuaries in the United States, trying to learn from what they did. Today we still do, and we are always full of questions and learning every day.

Nowadays, we realize we can't save all the animals by bringing them to the sanctuary, we know that is not the way, however, those animals we can rescue can share their story with the visitors. Our resident animals educate and create an emotional bond with the visitors so that they think twice the next time they desire to eat an animal. We believe education and personal connections are the keys to personal change and a big reason why sanctuaries are so important.

What has the experience of operating the sanctuary been like in Colombia? Are people supportive?

Things in Colombia are very different, in all aspects, not only in terms of the sanctuary.

The local people do want to support, and they want to understand; unfortunately, the country's economy is challenging, so donations rarely happen. Groups of volunteers would come once a month to help us when we were now in a pandemic, now hardly anyone visits. Additionally, sometimes it is difficult to find the right food for our animals because 90% of the commercial food here in the country contains bones and other parts of the body of the same animals, so we prepare the food from scratch, here.

In the beginning, it was tough to find suitable veterinarians, something that has improved a lot over time. Still, few have the expert knowledge we need to enable these animals to live long lives. The last 16 years have been quite tricky, but we have succeeded by learning from other sanctuaries around the world.

Do you have a favorite rescue story? Maybe an animal resident you feel a special connection with?

So many! But I always like to share Balaram the bull's story. We did not rescue Balaram; it was his mother who decided to save him. When we bought the first property where the sanctuary would begin, it happened to be next to a dairy farm. One day, we heard a crazy noise outside. We went out to see what was going on and found a pregnant cow had jumped over the fence and was giving birth to her baby in our sanctuary!

Holding this beautiful ginger bull in my arms, I noticed that he was born with a heart-shape on his forehead. Immediately the "owners" of this cow came to my property to take her and take the calf. I began to cry and beg that they allow them to stay in the sanctuary, but it was not possible. They only agreed to allow the calf to stay since, for the industry, male calves are garbage. And that is how Balaram became the first bull rescued in the country! Today he is 16 years old and two meters tall. He is happy and healthy. I honor his brave mother, who jumped the fence to put her baby in the only safe place at the moment in the country for him.

What are your favorite and least favorite parts of running a sanctuary?

I love to share with animals. I love to see how strong they are. I love the morning when we open the doors of their houses and they enjoy the first rays of the sun. I love how they are so organized. I love how they can still have amazing relationships with humans even when they know humans hurt animals. I love to see they know this is their opportunity to be free and how thankful they are.

The most difficult moment for me is finding these animals so mistreated that we cannot help them survive, and they can only enjoy their freedom for a few hours. Losing any animal is always difficult.

Another thing I find difficult is when we have to ask for donations. It is very uncomfortable and against my nature to ask for money. However, it is sad to witness people express support for our work but not willing to help with even a \$1 donation.

I would like people to understand that we spend all day cleaning, feeding, caring for these animals, and on top of everything, we are always in a lot of stress trying to raise funds so that these animals have the life they deserve. Most people cannot imagine how difficult it is.

But I can't complain, we have a small group of people who support us and we are incredibly grateful.

What would you most like people to know about farmed animals?

How sensitive they are and how innocent they are, and despite the abuse of humans, how they are not mad at us! Humans kill, abuse, and hurt them, and still, if you go close to them, they only have love in their hearts.

Oh, and how brave they are! They love life so much that they are brave enough to survive and see the next sunrise. I wish I can be like them; they are my heroes.

How can people support your work?

People can follow us on Instagram (<http://www.instagram/julianasanimalsanctuary>) and Tiktok (@julianasanimalsanctuary1) and interact with us. It is very important if you follow a sanctuary's social media and interact with the posts so more people can see the work. Some people can donate while others share our work, but this will help more people see and understand the animals we care for, our principal goal.

I wish that people understand that if they decide to donate \$5 or even \$1 dollars, that is HUGE!!! People feel bad because they think it is too small, but even \$1 makes a difference, especially when you live in this part of the world because everything is for the animals we rescue and they appreciate it! People can donate from one in our Patreon and received special "behind cameras" here <https://www.patreon.com/julianassanctuary>

You can also visit <https://julianasanimalsanctuary.org/> to donate and learn more. We thank Juliana for all her time working with us and incredible work on behalf of animals.