

## Local zoo doc nearing completion, raising funds.

by [CHRIS HERRINGTON](#)

Memphis has, by many accounts, one of the country's best zoos. But while the stars of the show are the pandas and polar bears and those randy giraffes, how often do visitors stop to think about the human companions taking care of these creatures?

"Zookeepers are a fascinating subculture," says local documentary filmmaker Joann Self Selvidge, who, in partnership with Detroit transplant filmmaker Sara Kaye Larson, is working on *The Keepers*, a feature-length documentary project that will take viewers behind the scenes at the Memphis Zoo.

"It's something that so few people do and so few people really understand," Self Selvidge says. "They either think it's just the people out there shoveling dung and look down on them or think about them in this fantastical, little-kid mold, like Dr. Dolittle."

In following the zookeepers, Self Selvidge and Larson, who are working on the project via Self Selvidge's True Story Pictures company, will look at "the intricate balance of conservation, ethics, and entertainment that every zoo must consider every moment, every season, every year," according to the film's online "pitch."

The idea originated with Larson, who moved to Memphis three years ago and started taking walks through the zoo. After months of meetings with Self Selvidge, the pair zeroed in on the idea of making a film from the perspective of the keepers and approached Memphis Zoo president and CEO Chuck Brady, himself a former keeper.

"We didn't come to the zoo until we'd made up our minds to approach it from the point of view of the keepers, what it's like to take care of wild animals in captivity," Self Selvidge says.

They approached the Memphis Zoo as independent filmmakers, not as partners.

"Most zoos would say, 'Hell no, you can't come in here with cameras,'" Self Selvidge says. "They're concerned with public perception, because people take images and take them out of context, especially animal activists. There was concern that we would provide fodder [for that]. We persuaded them that we weren't approaching it as anti- or pro-zoo but with the goal of thoughtfully showing, as honestly as possible, what it's like for the people who keep the animals. Wild animals in captivity is oxymoronic, but it's a reality. And it's becoming more so with so much of their habitats being destroyed."

Self Selvidge and Larson have been filming since last fall, starting with a bunch of different keepers then finding a couple to focus on.

"We'll shoot a few more months to have enough to pull together into a character-driven



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Sara Kaye Larson

documentary film that's going to hold people's attention for 90 minutes," Self Selvidge says.

When the duo began, they were thinking of doing a short film but found the community of keepers too rich to flesh out in that time frame. Now they're putting together a feature film they hope can find an audience on the indie festival circuit and hopefully beyond.

In the meantime, the duo is raising funds to complete the film. Much of the fund-raising is being done via individual donors and grants, but they also have a grassroots, small-donation campaign active at the moment, via the website [indiegogo.com](http://indiegogo.com) — at [indiegogo.com/thekeepersmovie](http://indiegogo.com/thekeepersmovie). As of press time, this online campaign was more than a third of the way to its \$15,000 goal and was slated to be open through February 7th.

Among the individual supporters are other zookeepers around the country, who have also helped raise the film's profile via social media.

"We have a ton of keepers from all over the place who have been following us," Self Selvidge says. "Some are jealous that this is happening at the Memphis Zoo."

For more information on *The Keepers*, including a two-minute trailer, see [indiegogo.com/thekeepersmovie](http://indiegogo.com/thekeepersmovie) or [truestorypictures.org](http://truestorypictures.org).