



A humble servant of nature; Preserving the environment is in the MacEwan bloodline

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The woman's gold bangles clink as she dunks her mop into a bucket of water, preparing to clean up a Frisbee-sized puddle of bird poop.

Against the blue concrete floor, the white droppings look like a lonesome cloud.

A golden eagle in the room - poised, defiantly still, his talons curled around a towel-covered log - sizes up the woman as she wrings out the mop: tall, willowy, beauty mark beneath her left eye.

Her silver hair is pulled up into a bun that's been secured with a claw hair clip. "Animal Liberation," it says on her ratty grey T-shirt.

"How are we doing, sweetie?" Heather MacEwan Foran says softly to the eagle as she pushes the mop back and forth over the floor beside his perch, washing up the mess. "You're looking very, very calm." The eagle does not reply. Down the hall, a tundra swan offers a haunting honk.

It is late November at the Alberta Institute for Wildlife Conservation, an animal rescue centre out in the country west of Airdrie. MacEwan Foran - the sole child of Alberta's ninth lieutenant-governor, Grant MacEwan, after whom MacEwan University in Edmonton is named - has volunteered at AIWC for more than a decade, part of a lifelong commitment she's made to wildlife conservation and animal welfare.

Every week, the 73-year-old drives her Dodge Ram 1500 (a very un-grandmotherly ride, she acknowledges) from her acreage southwest of Calgary to AIWC's headquarters, where she does all

manner of grunt work: cleaning cages, feeding snakes, owls and deer, folding the relentless stream of laundered sheets and towels needed for the animals' care.

"People hear about this place and they say, 'I'd love to volunteer there, hold the animals,' " she says, carrying the bucket of dirty water out of the aviary. "They don't realize this is what we do most of the time: clean up poop and blood and vomit."

Drudgery like this is not how you'd imagine the daughter of MacEwan, one of the most legendary public figures in Alberta history, spending her golden years. But MacEwan Foran is a woman who dares the imagination to expand, who coaxes expectations to fly away like wild birds released into nature.

The golden eagle in the rescue centre's aviary was found near Canmore, unable to fly, stand or eat due to extreme lead poisoning. Birds of prey regularly ingest bullet fragments, MacEwan Foran tells me, when consuming deer entrails that hunters have left behind. "He was in rough shape when he came in," she says. "He had to be force-fed."

The concrete floor is clean now and she's on to the next chore: chopping carrots and apples for fawns.

Grant MacEwan's daughter has volunteered at this centre for 11 years.

"Here's the grande dame that should be bossing us around, but she never complains, she never shirks any of the dirty stuff," the centre's founder, Dianne Wittner, says. "We think of her as royalty."

Wittner became a biologist so she could be alone in the wild, away from the people and their ill will toward nature. MacEwan Foran "has helped restore my faith in humanity," she says. "I don't feel like I'm out there alone fighting this fight. She's taught me that I can get just as much pleasure from human company as I can from animal company."

"If I can help one creature in a day, save one spider's life, one worm, one ant, one bigger creature at the (rescue) centre, then that's a good day's work," MacEwan Foran says. "I try in my own small way to do something."

Her way is far from small. MacEwan Foran belongs to at least 20 animal rights groups and environmental charities. She donates her own money to these causes, and channels funds to them through the Grant MacEwan Charitable Foundation, which she co-directs with husband Max Foran.

"'Pretty passionate' is an understatement," Foran says.

"I wouldn't say that animals and wildlife are essential to her nature. I'd say they're the essence. I mean that in the purest way possible. I know a lot of people who are into things, who are driven by motivation to do things, who go out and practise what they believe, but I've met no one (besides Heather) whose essence is defined by one thing."

When their friends say, "Oh Heather's so good with animals," Foran just shakes his head.

"You don't understand. A lot of people feed birds but it's not their essence."

MacEwan Foran isn't afraid to make her views known. BAN LEG-HOLD TRAPS!, a yellow decal on the tailgate of her truck shouts. She has protested with anti-fur groups (though never been arrested) and wears anti-fur buttons on all her jackets, even at formal events. "Usually people are kind of embarrassed and go off quickly to hang their fur coat up," she says.

For the past 46 years, since before she had children, MacEwan Foran has been a committed vegetarian. She followed in her father's footsteps; Grant MacEwan stopped eating meat in the 1950s, when vegetarianism was a preposterous notion, especially for a man involved with agriculture.

She credits her parents, especially her father, with inspiring her passion for environmentalism. "My love of nature, my respect for all life, certainly that came from my dad."

Heather MacEwan was born on May 3, 1939, in Saskatoon. She loved the outdoors, animals, sports: skiing, skating, snowshoeing, swimming.

The MacEwans were still living in Saskatoon when Heather's dad, then an agriculture professor at the University of Saskatchewan, bought a piece of land in the Alberta foothills in the 1940s.

He was judging a horse show, and, on a whim, picked up a half section near Priddis for \$12 an acre.

"Mother (Phyllis MacEwan) was furious," MacEwan Foran recalls. "In the Depression that was a lot of money."

Heather was only six or seven at the time, but couldn't stop thinking about that patch of land. "I'd never been there, I'd never seen it, but I wanted to live there. It just had this pull."

Finally, after the family moved to Winnipeg, they came to the property on a holiday. "And I absolutely knew," she says of the property where she and her husband live today.

Grant MacEwan might have been a wealthy businessman, but he was also incredibly frugal. He did not spoil his daughter - with one exception. "What I did have, which no one else had, was a horse," she says. "Father thought that would be good for a child."

At the age of 10, Heather got Chiquita, a palomino mare named after the banana because of its golden coat.

"Of course I was obsessed and wanted to spend every waking hour with my horse," she recalls, raising her voice over the sound of the piano. A fat white cat has jumped up onto the keys and ambles slowly to the low notes. "Quince, do you mind?"

The MacEwans moved to Calgary after Heather finished Grade 7. Chiquita came, too - in a train with a load of other race horses. "I said, 'I'm not coming without Chiquita,' and I think my parents realized I meant it, that I was going to run away."

She and the neighbour's son spent countless hours riding their horses bareback through the foothills around Priddis. Chiquita "had a mind of her own," MacEwan Foran says. Once, on a hot day, Chiquita lay down in the middle of Fish Creek (running through their property) to get rid of the flies.

Did the horse get its spirit from its mistress? Perhaps. As a child, Heather was independent, headstrong, fearless. In Winnipeg, Heather had her fun on the banks of the Red River. In winter, she was the brave one who went out "to test the ice, this sort of nonsense" and in the summer, she and her friends swam in an eddy off the main current. "I was always the first one in, leading my friends astray," she says. A mischievous grin spreads over her face. "There were a lot of things I didn't tell my parents, for sure."

The MacEwans gave their daughter freedom, but they were definitely strict. They insisted on manners, good behaviour, punctuality. "I had to be home by six o'clock, but if I was one minute late I was in trouble." Heather likes to joke it's her fault she has no siblings. "My parents took one look at me and said, 'There's no way we're having another one like that! One is plenty!' In reality, she doesn't know why the MacEwans didn't have more kids. People didn't talk about that sort of thing then, she says.

The dream of living on that piece of land near Priddis came true in 1974. She and Foran, then a grad student in history, were living in Calgary and borrowed money from Heather's parents to build a modest home at Priddis. They have lived on that patch of wild ever since. Heather has hundreds of bird feeders all over the property.

Developers are "salivating" over it, as MacEwan Foran puts it, but she's not selling. She has successfully applied for a conservation easement through the southern Alberta Land Trust Society, which means this small piece of virgin forest will be preserved in perpetuity. Her two daughters, Fiona and Lynwyn, will inherit the land but won't be able to subdivide it, or build on it.

MacEwan Foran doesn't believe the land even belongs to her. The land "owns itself," she says. "The creatures there can't be owned. It's more a sense of stewardship."

Her views echo Grant Mac-Ewan's respect for all living things, as outlined in the creed he wrote in 1969. "I believe morality is not complete until the individual holds all of the Great Spirit's creatures in brotherhood and has compassion for all," one line reads. "A fundamental concept of Good consists of working to preserve all creatures with feeling and the will to live." When Heather and Max built their house, they chose the barest spot they could find, so they wouldn't have to fell many trees. "My life philosophy is to have respect for all living things," she says. "You don't just respect humans, you have to think about other forms of life. I would never pick a wildflower, never."

"I generally hold the same philosophy," Max Foran says. "I'm in accord. Except I haven't got her strength. I'm not in her league." Max is Heather's "living souvenir from Australia," as she puts it with a giggle. The couple met in his native Australia in the early 1960s. She was on a two-year trip around the world and had stopped in Sydney to work as a diver for a research station.

Heather caught the travel bug when she finished high school, and took a bus from Calgary to Mexico with a friend.

"Father was mayor of Calgary then and he wasn't too happy about me doing this," she recalls. "He was worried I'd get kidnapped or killed."

The girls took a side trip to Catalina Island to see relatives. There, Heather fell in love with scuba diving after she met Al Hanson, a pro diver who'd done the underwater scenes for Kirk Douglas in *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. "These Canadian girls can't go home without seeing the bottom of the ocean," Hanson said to Heather and her friend. (The girls missed their ship home.)

After returning to Calgary, Heather trained as a teacher, then went on her round-the-world trip by ship.

The couple's home is a testament to their love of travel, history, nature, art. It has a log-cabin vibe - dimly lit, rustic - and is crammed to the gills with all manner of fascinating stuff: antlers, coal oil lamps, old-fashioned rocking chairs, seashells, knit blankets, bronze sculptures. Paintings climb the wood-paneled walls; the Rocky Mountains wave through the window in the distance. MacEwan Foran inherited a lot of the artwork, antiques and knick-knacks from her parents, who collected Canadiana before it was trendy. Some of the artwork is her own; MacEwan Foran is a wood carver and silversmith. Many of the bangles she wears (gold in the winter, silver in the summer) are her own creations.

Transparent vacuum-like hoses are strewn about the carpets in different rooms. They are play tubes for her two rescue ferrets, Jasper and Oliver. (They came with those names.) MacEwan Foran dotes on her ferrets, who run freely through the house; visitors must be careful not to step on them. Half-doors restrict their movements, and they are not permitted in the museum room, where she and Max keep more valuable heirlooms.

"My husband says anyone with pet ferrets is completely nuts," she says. "He loves to torment me about them." MacEwan Foran never planned to have children. "I liked animals better." Of falling pregnant, she says, "I wasn't upset, it just wasn't in the plan. But plans do change."

She stopped working as a teacher and devoted herself to raising her two daughters, Fiona and Lynwyn, 18 months apart.

Commitment is a trait MacEwan Foran learned from her dad, along with equal treatment of all people. He used to make her invite all her classmates to her birthdays, even the girls she didn't particularly like. "Father didn't like picking and choosing."

Once, as lieutenant-governor, Grant MacEwan turned down an invitation from the Queen to dine on the Yacht Britannia while she was visiting Canada. He'd already promised to attend a Boy Scouts banquet in Lac La Biche. "To Father, the Queen was no more important than the Boy Scouts. And that is the lesson I've learned from my dad, that everyone is the same."

She's the first to tell you, neither she nor her father is perfect. Her dad's thriftiness bothered her. He shopped at thrift stores, travelled by bus, even though he could afford better. "I'm not a wild spendthrift but if I want something I'll buy it. Father would go to real extremes to save a penny."

Still, she respects her father's memory by travelling to Edmonton on the bus once a year to attend the MacEwan Faculty Association barbecue. "My father loved the MacEwan (University) connection, he loved young people. I like the connection, too."

Back at the rescue centre, MacEwan Foran is helping Barb Kowalzik, AIWC's assistant director of wildlife care, clean an oil-slicked goldeneye. "Oh, I know, Muffin," Kowalzik says as they blow-dry the duck's black and white feathers. "Look at that tail!" Kowalzik says. They expect the bird to survive.

MacEwan Foran herself is an amazing tale of survival. In 2002, two days after Christmas, she had a seizure while driving Max into Calgary. Doctors found a malignant brain tumour, told her it was terminal, that surgery would only prolong her life. She began taking steroids to shrink swelling in her brain. Against all odds, the tumour disappeared as well, and MacEwan Foran never had surgery.

"I've been fine ever since, touch wood." She hits her hand on the table; her bangles jingle. "I was the one-in-a-million story. I have no idea why."

Scar tissue in her brain affects her memory, but "if I don't know something, I know I don't know it."

"I can't tell you how grateful we were that she recovered and she's back among us," AIWC founder Wittner says. "She's family. But not trailer trash family. Family with class. She's a fine example of humanity."

Many of the rescue centre's animals have been released on land that's still in Grant MacEwan's family.

"There is nothing as wonderful as seeing a wild animal go back to the wild," MacEwan Foran says. "It's the best feeling in the world to see these little fellows saunter back into the woods. You feel like a parent, a grandparent."

She takes comfort knowing the property at Priddis, and the animals that live there, will be protected. And she vows to spend the rest of her days on this piece of land, feeding birds and coyotes, walking through these woods that are her father's legacy, her legacy. "When I leave, it will be in a plain pine box," she says.