



MANDY, My Compassionate Leopard Friend:

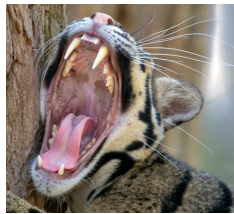
*How One Soft as a Cloud Leopard
Saved My Life and Even Helped Me Find My Wife*

Sid Galloway BS, MDIV — sidgalloway.com

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WHO was Mandy?

Mandy wasn't simply a clouded leopard. She was one of the gentlest, most affectionate animals I have ever known. Hand-raised after her mother rejected her as a cub, she grew up trusting the people who cared for her. Yet what I remember most is not how much I comforted Mandy, but how often she comforted me. During one of the darkest seasons of my life, her companionship became one of the unexpected gifts that helped keep me alive.



CLOUDED-Leopards?

Southeast Asian clouded leopards (*Neofelis nebulosa*) are among the most remarkable of all wild cats. Their velvety fur is one of the softest of any mammal—though not as thick, it is every bit as soft as a chinchilla's. In striking contrast, they possess the longest canine teeth of any living feline relative to body size, so proportionally large that paleontologists often compare them to those of the extinct saber-toothed cats.

Clouded leopards are also among nature's greatest acrobats. Their unusually flexible ankle joints allow their hind feet to rotate backward, enabling them to climb down tree trunks headfirst like giant squirrels. With their long counter balancing tails, they move effortlessly through the forest canopy—climbing, hanging, and leaping from branch to branch with a gymnastic agility that seems to defy gravity.



WHO am I?

I grew up rescuing injured wildlife and eventually earned my first degree, a BS in biology and psychology. Searching for a meaningful vocation was a journey that led to the New Orleans Audubon Zoo, where I

cared for elephants and large carnivores (lions, tigers, bears, hyenas, wolves, etc.) and learned that trust—not force—was the foundation of good animal care.

Good modern zoos devote countless hours to positive reward **cooperative care training**, teaching animals to voluntarily participate in medical and husbandry procedures. Rather than forcing an animal through stressful restraint, instead whenever possible, keepers patiently reward behaviors such as presenting a shoulder for an injection, offering a paw for examination, opening the mouth for a dental check, or calmly entering a transport crate. This approach makes procedures safer, less stressful, and often eliminates the need for anesthesia. But as most lovers of house cat pets know from experience, *feline* independence limits their trainability compared to other animals like dogs and elephants.

MANDY GETS “SHOT”

The moment had come. For an hour Mandy heard and smelled the zoo veterinarian working his way down the hall, vaccinating the other animals. Using a pole-syringe and a dart-gun the vet had already “shot” the lions and tigers, so Mandy knew she was next in line for the painful injection.

Pole syringes and dart guns not only hurt, but can on rare occasions be dangerous if an animal suddenly moves. Either method can accidentally hit a bone or an eye if the animal turns quickly before the shot hits the body. Obviously the safest way is to use a normal hand syringe, just like a vet does for a house-cat in a clinic, or nurse does for a child. That’s what I wanted for Mandy!

I knew I could trust Mandy. With a determined look on my face, I asked the vet if I could climb into Mandy’s inside-den and hold her up to the wire mesh so he could use an ordinary hand syringe. As you can imagine, his reaction was, “*Are you nuts?*”. But I was insistent and promised that if Mandy bit me, I would not tell anyone why or how. So, the vet finally agreed, — *maybe he just wanted to see what would happen.*

As I entered her inside-den, Mandy did what she always did. She ran over to me, rubbed her head all over my legs like a pet house cat does, and then gently climbed up my pants and shirt into my arms. All cats (except cheetahs) have very sharp retractable claws. Many people don’t know that cats can consciously control how far they extend their sharp claws. So, Mandy was always careful to barely stick out her claws just enough to miss my skin and *only* hook my pants and shirt as she climbed my body —

while I helped guide her up. This time, once her head was next to mine, she wrapped both of her front legs around my shoulders, lower legs around my waist, hugged me tightly, and rubbed her face against my neck like an oversized kitten.

In that position, I carried her over to the wire mesh next to the vet. She first looked at him with her eyes as wide open as I'd ever seen them, then she looked back at me, pressed her soft face hard against my neck, closed her eyes, and hugged me as tight as she could. We stood there embraced together like a single body, while the vet gently and safely administered the injection by hand. When he finished, he smiled at us both and admitted he'd never seen *anything* quite like it.

MUTUAL Therapy

As a boy and as a young adult at the zoo, I struggled with crippling anxiety, PTSD, depression, and even thoughts of ending my own life. Dysfunctional family dynamics can have a profoundly lasting negative impact on children, especially if one of the parents has BPD (*Borderline Personality Disorder*). Yet the good news is that those effects can be overcome, and for many people it's the unconditional love from animals that serves as a part of the positive healing process. (*You can read more about this in other essays on my website, SidGalloway.com*)

Mandy lived with two other clouded-leopards, a young female Koa and an older large male Hanoi. Those two were not hand raised, so they were not nearly as gentle or safe around me — and not even for Mandy. Koa and especially Hanoi were wild and rough, even aggressive and dangerous when they “played”. Play for them could quickly turn into an attack. So I never went inside with Hanoi, and only occasionally with Koa.



Like most clouded leopards, Mandy, Koa, and Hanoi were naturally solitary rather than social. Whenever all three were together in the outdoor habitat, Hanoi's dominant, aggressive temperament immediately changed the atmosphere. Mandy's ears flattened, her eyes tracked his every movement, and she flinched whenever he came too close. She never relaxed until she was safely back inside and close to me.

Because of that, we never allowed Hanoi into the habitat with Mandy or Koa unless a keeper stood watch behind the barrier with a garden hose in hand. Usually, a single

squirt of water was enough to interrupt his charge and send him racing back to his indoor den.

Hand raised “wild” animals like Mandy are often so accustomed to people that they crave human contact. In fact for some, being around other animals, even their own species, is often frightening, not comforting. Obviously that was definitely the case with Mandy. For her, being stroked or hugged by compassionate humans was her safe place, her favorite place. Even as a full grown leopard physically, her personality and character remained tame as a kitten. During my work breaks and lunch periods I’d spend special time with Mandy, either in her indoor den area — or if it was before public visitor hours we’d play chase and wrestle together throughout her jungle habitat.

Those special times were much needed therapy for both of us. I’ve often wondered whether Mandy knew how much comfort she was giving me. She, along with several other animal friends, became one of the reasons I stayed alive.

Even the Gentlest Souls Have Their Limits

I’ve emphasized how amazingly gentle Mandy was. Yet, she was also smart and like any human or animal, we all have our limits when it comes to abuse. In some of my other animal stories I’ve shared a lot about how many human workers from the “old school” times of animal training were abusive compared to modern compassionate practices. So I won’t go into those details here. Instead, this particular moment in Mandy’s story, in many ways, speaks for itself.

One of the zoo’s long-time senior head keepers, who had a level of authority, was a man who let’s just say had an “anger problem”, among other issues. Eventually I convinced the zoo to fire him. You can find out more about that and his abusive attitudes and actions in my other online animal stories. This particular event involved sweet, gentle Mandy.

Every evening, we caregiver zookeepers would go around and call each of the animals by name to leave their outside habitats and come inside their individually separated indoor den areas to be locked up for safety at night. As you can imagine, many of the animals wanted to stay outside, especially those that were more nocturnal. But they knew they would not get their evening food unless they came inside. So most complied, but occasionally outdoor distractions or attractions made them refuse to come in.

If a hand-raised and relatively safe animal was reluctant to come inside, our “free contact” policy allowed us to go outside and either coax or even carry the animal inside. Often that was how we got Mandy inside at night because of her nocturnal outdoors nature.

One evening while I was in another area calling the tigers, Akela and Rakshi, into their inside night dens I could hear a distant man’s voice angrily cursing, plus Mandy growling and hissing. Even though it was far away I knew what was happening. Mandy had refused to voluntarily come inside. And the head keeper with the “anger-problem” had somehow caused Mandy’s deep defensive nature to come to the surface. So I took off running to protect her!

As I finally got to the building and its long hallway leading towards the human steel door of Mandy’s jungle habitat I could see the door was open. I saw the man standing over Mandy, still cursing, and also holding up her tail and kicking her in the head with his cowboy boot. Poor Mandy was finally reaching her limit. She was hissing and growling and begging him to stop.

I was a young man, much smaller than that head keeper, yet as I ran towards him he turned back I was fully prepared to jump on him. Just as I was about to reach him, Mandy had had enough of his kicking. When his boot was swinging again towards her face, in a flash of speed — she grabbed it with her two front clawed paws — pulled it into her mouth — and bit through the leather into his foot! He screamed, let go of her tail, and she jumped up into my arms.

He stood there still cursing under his breath and examining his foot, I carried Mandy towards her night time den. As Mandy and I walked to her small den door, she held me tight, rubbed her head against my neck, and purred the way clouded-leopards do — they blow air out of their mouths so their lips vibrate making a soft fluttering sound called chuffing or puffing.

NAP-TIME with Mandy

Whenever I was stressed or depressed, spending time with Mandy was the best “therapy”. But one morning had a very different outcome. Before the “public” visitors arrived, I’d feed my animal friends, let them outside into their natural habitats, and then clean their inside night dens. When I was done, I’d often keep Mandy inside her den to play with her or to just lay down with her for a rest break. Sometimes we’d go outside in



her jungle habitat (without Koa or Hanoi). Her lush enclosure was full of plants, huge tree trunks and criss-crossing limbs, rock cliffs, and a waterfall with a small pool.

One morning after we'd exhausted ourselves running around, wrestling, and playing, I laid back on a large long slanted log to rest. As usual, Mandy climbed up on top of me, stretched out over my chest stomach and legs, with her body parallel to mine and her head resting on my neck. In seconds, we were both deep asleep together. *Suddenly*, we awoke to the sound of a blood-curdling scream. Mandy and I jumped up in a panic to see a woman zoo visitor clearly in shock standing on the wooden boardwalk outside the habitat with her hands clasped onto the sides of her face and her mouth hanging open! Apparently, Mandy and I had slept until the zoo opened for "business" and this unlucky visitor had walked up to see the leopard "exhibit". Instead, it turned out to be a memorable, *unforgettable* event for all three of us.

MATCHMAKER Mandy Helped Me Find a Wife



Long after I'd left the zoo, I become a para-veterinary emergency-surgical assistant — while planning to soon pursue a counseling-psychology Master's and PhD degree. I met a young woman, Linda, who shared my compassionate love for animals. We were both in our late 20's. So I decided to take her on one of our initial dates to the zoo and introduce her to my many exotic animal friends.

My area of animals at that time was called the Asian Domain. Each of the Asian Domain's outdoor animal species habitats with their beautiful jungle "yards" were built in a circular pattern next to one another — bordered in the front with a huge wooden walkway all the way around them for the visitors' viewing. As Linda and I walked from habitat to habitat and I explained who each of my animal friends were, plus a little bit about their special *personalities*, we eventually reached the clouded-leopard "exhibit". Mandy was the only one in the habitat that day and she was asleep, way up on a jungle cliff ledge.

I asked Linda if she wanted to meet Mandy up close. And of course she did. So, I began “chuffing” by blowing air through my lips to make the same soft vibrating clouded-leopard characteristic greeting sound. *Instantly*, Mandy’s head popped up, and began looking around while answering back with the same chuffing sound. Her eyes scanned the area until she finally saw my face. Jumping down numerous rock ledges to the ground and then running as fast as she could, Mandy ran up to the front alongside the nearly invisible barrier wall of taut vertical wires. She rubbed her head back and forth against the wires right in front of where Linda and I were standing on the wooden walkway.

Mandy was begging for me to come touch, rub, and scratch her body. But separating Linda and I from the taut vertical wires forming the front “wall” barrier of the leopard’s exhibit was a 4 ft. metal railing, plus a wide 5 ft. garden. Mandy’s plea was too much for me to ignore. I climbed over the railing, worked through the thick garden, and knelt down so I could give her what she’d missed — ever since I’d resigned from working at the zoo. Back and forth she paced against the wires, “purring” her soft clouded-leopard chuffs, while I spoke *gently* to her — and used my fingers to massage, rub, and scratch every part of her head and body I could reach!

It was a beautiful reunion for Mandy and me. Long afterward, Linda told me that watching the love and trust my leopard friend and I shared that afternoon was one of the moments that quietly convinced her she wanted to share her life with me.

Looking back, I realize Mandy wasn’t simply an animal I cared for. During one of the darkest seasons of my life, she was God’s unexpected gift, a bright ray of mutual compassion. And Mandy served as a catalyst to cement the wonderful relationship I’ve had with my angelic wife, Linda (for 43 years now). Mandy has long since passed on, yet I look forward with hope to seeing her again in the eternal realm — together forever, where compassion, not fear or suffering, will have the final word!

Sid Galloway BS, MDIV, (PhD? Not quite) — SidGalloway.com