

Girl's best friend? Pets include python, crab, horse; Animal lover has few pet peeves

By LISA BRANTLEY
Staff Writer

Heads turn when Eileen Gesoff walks down Stadium Drive. Her pet python, Seymour, might have something to do with it.

"I just stick him on my neck when I go places," Gesoff says of the 3-foot, 6-month-old snake that is her frequent traveling companion on campus. "It's a big conversation piece because people think he's a bandana or necklace and then they get up close and he's moving."

Gesoff, a freshman biology major from Boca Raton, Fla., is no stranger to unusual pets.

"I've always had snakes," she says. "Anywhere in Florida they're running around. I used to pick them up and bring them home all the time. Finally I decided to go out and buy a real snake — a nice, domesticated exotic snake."

Gesoff estimates Seymour's skin may be worth \$2,000 in several years (more than 30 times the \$60 she paid for him at a local pet store six weeks ago). But she says she has developed such strong emotional attachments to her pets that she can never sell one. "Once I buy an animal, I never get rid of it — never sell it or trade it ever."

When she entered UNC, only her Great Dane and four cats were left behind with her family. Elan, the Arabian horse she has had for four years, came with her, and she soon acquired Seymour as well as a stray kitten.

Because pets are not allowed in the dorm, Gesoff took the kitten home to Florida. Seymour stays at Vine Veterinary Clinic's Pet Manor, where Gesoff has a part-time animal care job on weekends, and Elan stays on a farm outside Chapel Hill. Both are locations

Gesoff can visit daily.

In recent years, Gesoff has had a possum, a rabbit, a parrot, a hermit crab, birds, chickens, gerbils and fish as pets. She says she still gets very upset when a pet dies.

"The hermit crab rode on the dashboard of my car, and I cried when he died," Gesoff says. "I can't stand to see an animal suffering. I have to help them."

Her love for all types of animals often makes feeding Seymour a live mouse every two weeks an emotional ordeal, she says. It takes that long for him to fully digest and expel the mouse, she says.

It is a myth that snakes chew their food, she adds. "Seymour doesn't touch anything with his teeth when he eats things. He just swallows them."

Seymour's skin is warmer than most people expect and not slimy, Gesoff says. "Everyone who's held him says, 'Wow, he doesn't feel the way I thought he would.'"

When Gesoff got the snake, she bought a special heating pad for the floor of his cage to keep the environment around 80 degrees. She also borrowed library books to read about the care of reptiles.

"I wanted to make sure he didn't die, because so many reptiles taken out of their environment do," she says.

Gesoff has many stories of her contact with animals at home on the Florida beaches. She once rode her horse to the Burger King drive-in and ordered apple pie for him.

Last Spring Break, she dusted the sand from a mother sea turtle's eyes after it laid its eggs and then couldn't get it to stop following her. "It was 1 a.m. and all these tourists were still

taking pictures."

Gesoff says she also came in contact with animals when she was swimming, snorkeling or scuba diving. She is getting her certificate in scuba diving, which she calls "the most fascinating sport you could ever do."

"Marine life is incredible," she says. "If you just draw a fish on a piece of paper in all types of colors, there is somewhere in the world where that fish is."

Although Gesoff admits she has had some bad experiences with pets, such as when a Chow dog bit her at work, she says what upsets her most is when people misperceive or overreact to animals.

One girl who saw Gesoff and Seymour from a distance at a party screamed for five seconds. "It was totally uncalled for," Gesoff says.

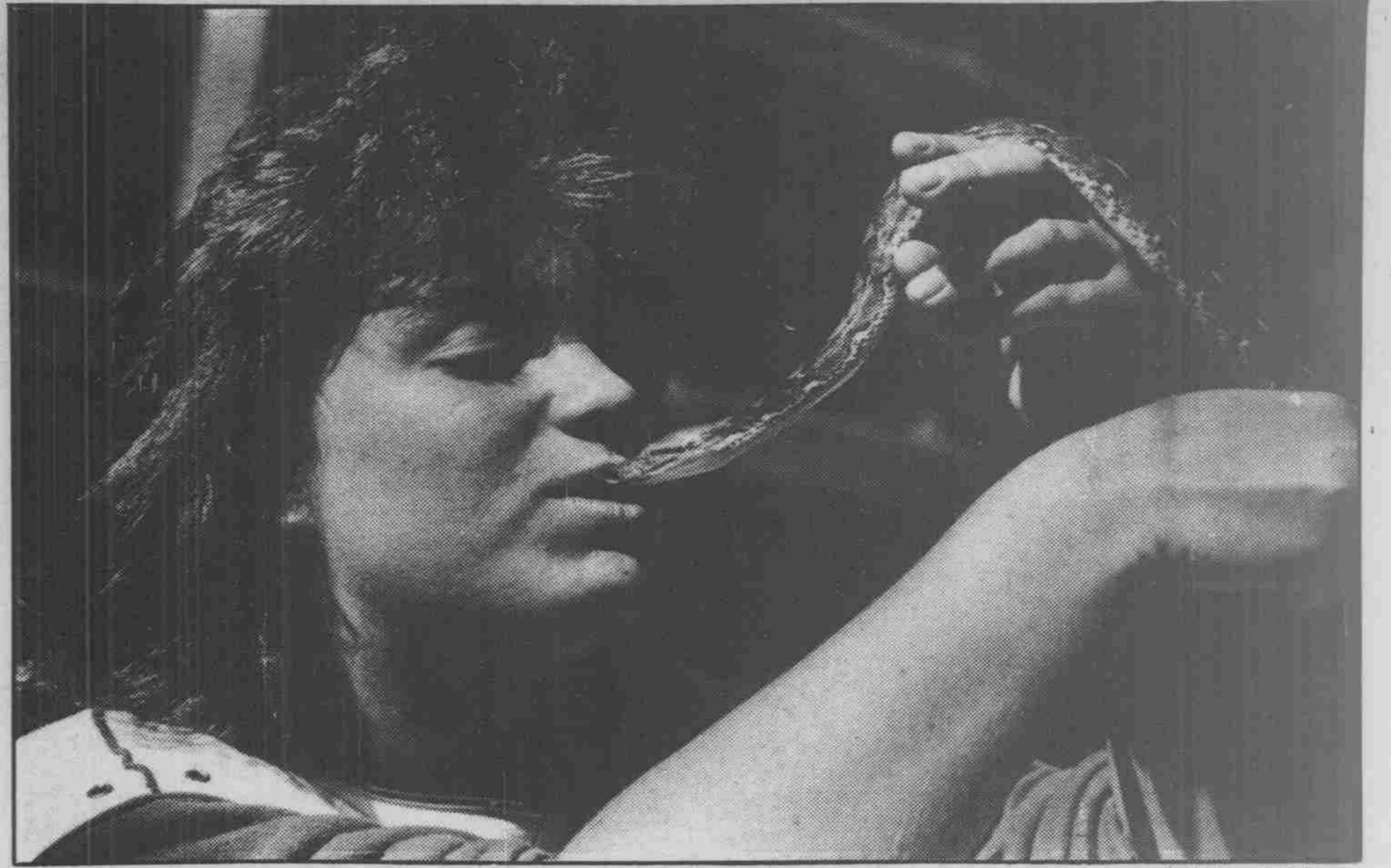
Another "pet peeve" is the way media portray some animals as aggressive when they're not, Gesoff says.

"The most important thing about odd pets is that anything you see on TV, like 'Jaws,' is so fake," she says. Her experiences with sharks while surfing led her to believe they did not like human flesh, she adds.

"Society is just so brainwashed into thinking these animals are mean or vicious," she says.

Weekdays, Gesoff extracts microorganisms from river water in the biology labs. But she says she prefers contact with domestic animals to lab work and that she eventually wants to become a veterinarian and have a breeding farm for Arabian horses.

During her senior year in high school, Gesoff had an internship at Del Ray Training Center, a nationally-known Florida stable for thoroughbred



Eileen Gesoff displays some affection toward her pet snake, Seymour. DTH/Elizabeth Lamm

racehorses.

Of all the animals that she's owned, Gesoff admits that her horse Elan is her favorite. She is teaching Elan to jump and says she occasionally uses other people's horses to jump in shows.

One of Gesoff's biggest regrets is that Elan must stay in Chapel Hill over holidays because she cannot afford the trailer fees to transport him.

"When I do something he doesn't like, Elan gets mad," she said. "People don't

realize animals have personalities.

"I looked for two years for a horse that had personality. He was underweight, undernourished and scummy-looking, but he had a sparkle in his eyes."

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