

The Making of an Aviculturist: Samantha's Story

by Sheldon Dingle, Alhambra, CA

When I visit various bird clubs and aviaries I always look for young people involved in aviculture. I find all too few. But sometimes I find a *real* aviculturist who is also *really* young. That's what this story is all about.

This story covers three generations. Leslie Jennifer Gillis was raised by her parents (Morris and Vi Kyle) to love birds — exotics as well as the indigenous species around the house and in the fields. The Kyles kept assorted exotic birds including Bee Bee Parrots, Canaries, a Budgerigar, and a few other small birds.

Vi Kyle got her first first Amazon (a very sick Orange-winged) for \$50 from the local K-Mart in Fresno, California in 1969. For another \$25 the pet department manager threw in a cage and told her that he did not think the bird would live very long. Kyle took the bird anyway — she hated to see it sick and unloved.

This story has a happy ending — actually, it is not ended yet. Kyle nursed the Amazon (now named Harvey) back to health and it has not had a sick day since. Harvey still lives with the Kyles. (As an aside, Harvey was thought to be a female but when an African Grey Parrot was added to the household, Harvey became so excited she laid eggs in the seed dish.)

None of this was lost on young Leslie Jennifer.

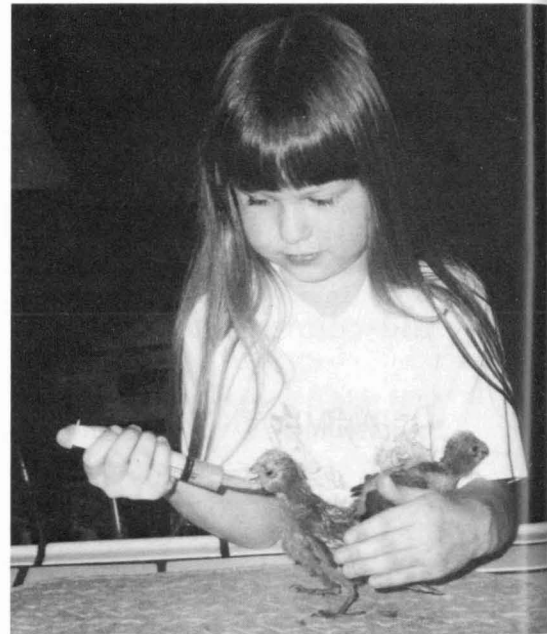
Leslie was taught how to handfeed abandoned baby wild birds by her mom and grew up with a love and appreciation of birds. Her father (Morris Kyle) feeds over 100lbs. of wild bird seed a month and unknown amounts of peanuts and sunflower for the larger native birds and maintains

about 12 hummingbird feeders to this day. He enjoys all the migratory birds that follow the San Joaquin River — his friends call him Mr. Audubon now. During the summer months he refreshes the wild birds' drinking water throughout the day and you will never find an empty feeder. He and Samantha (his granddaughter and the main subject of this article) have been known to sit out in the back yard watching all the different birds feeding for hours at a time.

Samantha (AKA Sam) was born into a home that had many birds. Her mother, Leslie Jennifer Gillis (formerly Kyle) had finches to Amazons. Toddler Samantha was quite content to sit in the living room and watch all the finches in a flight built off the window where one can view the birds year around. She would sit there for hours. She loved the Lady Gouldians and



Samantha Gillis traveled to Sacramento to the hearing of AB 409 as one of the members of her bird club opposing the bill adverse to aviculture.



Samantha at age five handfeeding baby Kakariki's



Two wonderful young women of aviculture - Samantha Gillis and world renown author, speaker, and bird breeder Rosemary Low.

Photos by Leslie J. Gillis



Samantha at school with her Cockatiel "Luna" for show and tell. The teacher was quite surprised at how much information Sam passed on to her classmates.

made friends with a Blue-capped Cordon Blue. He would flutter at the window when she was there — up and down — and Sam would watch wearing a very big smile. She said "This is my bird."

When Sam was about three years old she became very interested in helping her mother handfeed birds. Gillis would let Sam help feed the wild jays and crows being rehabilitated for release. Sam would scream with delight when they took the food from her tiny fingers. These birds, of course were fed only from necessity — to keep them from dying. All of the birds were released, of course, when they were healthy and on their own.

Occasionally a baby Cordon Blue would hatch out and need to be fed from day one. Sam watched with great interest and always offered to help. Gillis always declined.

When Sam was about four-and-a-half years old her mother allowed her to help raise a Green Singer. Of course, Sam and the singer became pals.

Then the day finally came when Sam wanted a bird of her own — the 200 plus birds on the property

belonged to Gillis and Sam knew it. Sam begged for a bird of her own and was told that if she helped raise the two baby Kakarikis being fed, she would get her own bird. Sam pitched right in and began handfeeding the baby parrots. Indeed, she became very



Samantha and her mother, Leslie, painted the walls of the aviary housing Plum-headed Parakeets.



The finch aviary off Gillis's living room where Samantha befriended a Cordon Blue.

Photos by Leslie J. Gillis



Samantha Danielle Gillis - the future of aviculture - with a handfed Green Singer.

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possessive and thought she should be the only one to feed them. Gillis let her think that but would sneak in and feed the babies at need throughout the day.

Sam was very proud when the birds feathered out and learned to fly. They now live outside in one of the flights.

For her efforts and diligence, Sam bought her first bird at the Fresno Bird Mart put on by the Central California Avian Society. She bought an unweaned pied Cockatiel from Rod and Carlene Silva. Samantha promised to handfeed it and she did — with a little help and a lot of oversight from her mother. (Coincidentally, the first bird Sam's mother bought as *her* own was also a female Cockatiel.)

Sam named the bird Stella Luna, after one of her favorite books. Samantha was proud of Stella and took her to her first grade class for show and tell and told everyone how to take good care of a Cockatiel. Her teacher was impressed with Sam's great knowledge about taking care of birds.

Samantha has been attending Central California Avian Society meetings since she was three years old and has made more meetings than most of the club members. She is the youngest voting member and attends the CCAS board meetings with her mother.

Samantha loves meeting the speakers and has been known to draw pictures of birds to present to various speakers. Indeed, when I spoke at CCAS, it was the crayon bird drawing Sam quietly put in my hand after the meeting. That really touched me and inspired me to learn more about Sam, one of the world's youngest true aviculturists.

And I am in good company. Not long ago Sam presented a bird drawing the the world renowned Rosemary Low who was speaking at the Foothill Bird Fanciers club. Sam doesn't mind traveling a bit to hear a famous bird expert.

Samantha loves to visit with the members of her club and enjoys talking with Gene Hall, Dale Thompson, and Dr. Sue Lynch, the veterinarian at the local Chaffee Zoo in Fresno.. She also enjoys the tours when the Society visits different aviaries.

One of Sam's best friends in the Society is a gentleman named Christian

Yost. He kinda spoils her by often giving her his winnings off the raffle table. And not only does Yost spoil Sam, when Mel and Shirley Lehman realized that the Society T-shirts were all too big for Sam, they bought a smaller shirt, had it specially embroidered with the Society logo, and gave it to Sam as a gift (which Sam wears with great pride). Indeed, Sam thinks of many of the society's members as her personal friends.

Sam, herself, saves money up and buys raffle ticket every month in high hopes of winning *anything*.

Although only eight years old, Sam is a voting member of the club for the second year and knows more about birds than most of the adults.

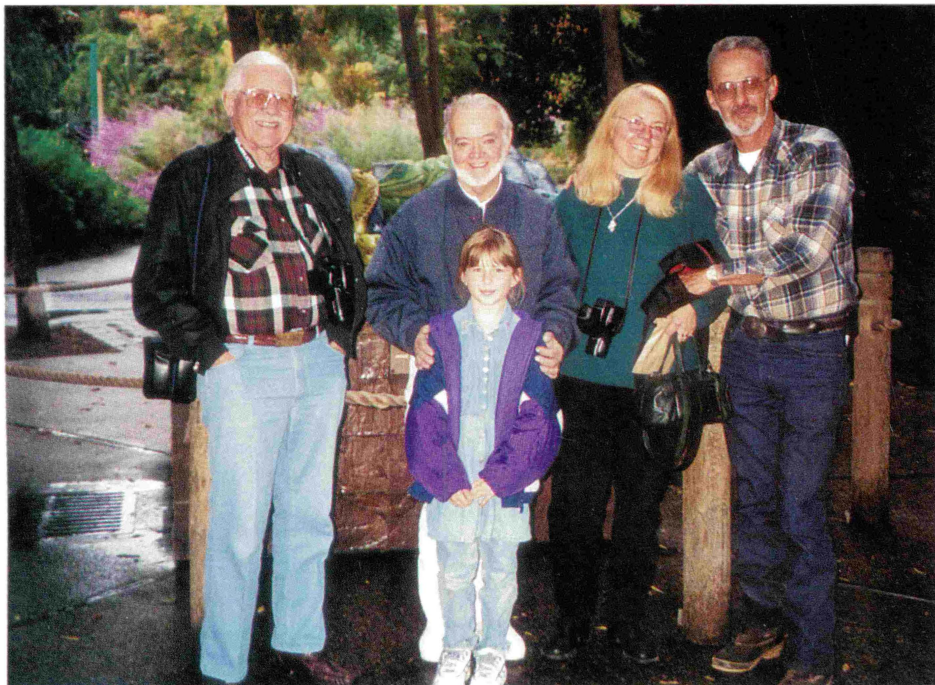
Her genuine smile and excitement when seeing a new bird for the first time reveal the spirit of a true bird lover. She looks at the beauty of the *birds* and not the dollar value. Hopefully that will never change. Odd, but that is the same way the great Jean Delacour looked at birds — clear into his eighties and nineties.

As did her mother when a child, Sam enjoys helping raise Scrub Jays, Crows, Robins, House Finches and other distressed wild birds. It is still very hard on mother and daughter when the day come for releasing these rehabilitated birds. But, Sam understands the reasons for feeding them and for releasing and accepts the releases with fewer tears each time.

Like most of us, Sam has learned some things the hard way. She once stuck her hand into a breeding cage of a pair of Lilac-crowned Amazons who were nesting. Even after being bitten very badly, though, she forgave the bird and understood it was her mistake, not the bird's fault. After the tears and bleeding stopped, she regained a friendship with the pair (albeit a more *careful* friendship) that has lasted until this day.

Sam knows, too, all the work that goes into caring for birds. In addition to the heavy chores of handfeeding, she cleans out cages, checks food and water and even serves as her mother's only helper in putting the flights up and painting walls with floral prints or something to brighten up the aviaries.

Sam's only bird gave her babies the



Little Samantha Gillis is in very good avicultural hands. Dr. Gordon Hackett (left), Gene Hall, Ilana and Roland Cristo have well over a century of avicultural experience among them.

last two years, so she considers herself the grandmother to the offspring and doesn't want to sell any of them. She is now building her own flock up. How many of you remember *those* days?


Samantha has spent many hours helping her mother catch up loose birds after the bird marts. Last June every day after school they drove back to Fresno to the fairground to catch up loose birds. If no one did this, the birds would remain in the building and die of starvation, so every day for five days they made the 35 mile trip to Fresno, carrying a power squirt gun, flashlight, nets, and carriers.

They saved many birds from certain death. Some birds captured still needed handfeeding and Sam took on that job and helped wean one Pennant's Rosella, one Indian Ring-necked Parakeet and one Cockatiel. They also caught Zebra Finches and doves and went back until every last bird was saved. One bird was given away and the rest remain under Samantha's watchful eyes.

The aviaries of Leslie Jennifer Gillis and daughter Samantha contain kakarikis, Amazon parrots (that bite fingers of little girls), various *Neophemas*, finches, Princess of Wales

Parakeets, Button Quail, Canaries, and three Slaty-headed Parakeets. There were four until the wind blew over a great tree and crushed an aviary (while this story was being written) and one of the Slaty-headed made a break for it and was last seen heading for northern India.

It is all too seldom that we find young people coming up in aviculture. Such young folks need to be nurtured, encouraged, and assisted in every way possible lest aviculture die out as a hobby and avocation.

Samantha Danielle Gillis is the very sort of youth upon which the future of aviculture depends. And great credit goes to her mother and grandfather for bringing about this wonderful young third-generation aviculturist. Sam, we love you. 

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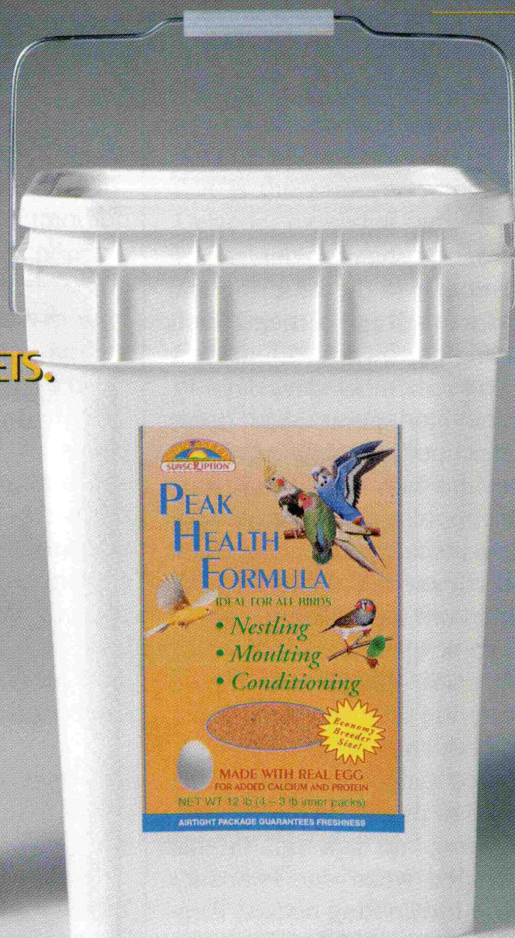
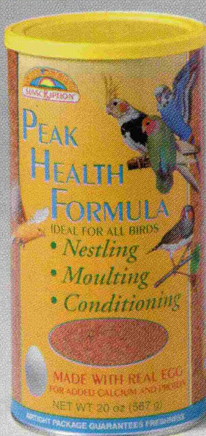
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