

# ORANGUTAN

Sitting in the dining room of their Denver home, David Miller, JD '77, and Barbara Zeek Shaw, MSW '84, are surrounded not only by photos of two children and three grandchildren, but also by images of the orangutans they've rescued in central Borneo, Indonesia. Shaw pops up to grab album after album filled with heartwarming snapshots of apes that the couple first met eight years ago at the research center founded by Biruté Galdikas, the primate authority who—along with chimp expert Jane Goodall and gorilla specialist Dian Fossey—is known as one of “Louis Leakey’s Angels.” Striking images also chronicle the couple’s personal journey from occasional volunteers to passionate advocates working on behalf of the endangered great red apes.

## Taken to heart

Somalia, Shaw’s fosterling during her second trip to Borneo, is one of the orangutans featured most often in the photos. When Shaw first spotted the caged 2-year-old, he was emaciated, bald and covered with open sores. He’d bitten his captors, so they’d given up trying to feed him, but he was too small to seek food on his own. The next day, when Shaw brought Galdikas to the government facility where Somalia was caged, they were told he’d “gone back to the forest,” a phrase sometimes used to report an orangutan’s death. After waiting patiently through most of the humid, leech-infested day, they were relieved when a ranger finally located the infant in an old orangutan nest at the top of a 50-foot tree.

Thankfully, Somalia was still alive, and Galdikas convinced forestry officials to let her bring him to her rehabilitation site. Shaw took over his care for the next five weeks. “I knew I had to get him to connect to me, or he would die” she remembers,

noting that baby orangutans normally receive 24-hour-a-day attention from their mothers.

At first, although the toddler would take food from her, he refused to cling to her as babies do in the wild. Then one day, an Indonesian walked into the room. The man must have reminded Somalia of the one who killed his mother, for he hooted and anxiously climbed into her lap. “Somalia grabbed hold, and then he *was* attached to us. Literally, we couldn’t put him down from then on,” Shaw says.

For the next several weeks, Shaw and Miller tended Somalia ’round the clock. Shaw remembers rocking the baby in a hammock as he played with his toes and tried to lick the freckles off her arm (baby orangutans learn what’s edible by taking the “leftovers” remaining on mom’s hair). “Of all the times,” Shaw says, “that’s probably when I felt the most emotionally attached.” Today, she says proudly, Somalia is thriving—though as a jealous pre-teen, he sometimes picks on other babies Shaw is nurturing.

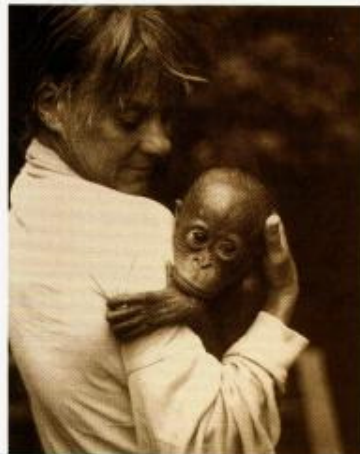
## A loveable relative

One of humankind’s closest living relatives, the great red apes are among the most intelligent beings to have evolved on land. The word “orangutan,” derived from the Malaysian words “orang” (person) and “hutan” (forest), acknowledges their kinship to humans.

The largest tree-dwelling animals, orangutans live 50–60 years, swinging through the rainforest canopy on long, tremendously strong arms. But, as Shaw and Miller agree, their behavior and expressions can be uncannily human, inspiring feelings of shared experience and awe.

For example, Shaw recalls a female ape named Princess,

A tablespoon of  
TLC for the great  
“people of the forest”



# RESCUE

who watched people around Galdikas' research site, Camp Leakey, come and go by canoe. One day, Princess noticed some particularly tantalizing blossoms on the other side of the river. She stole a canoe from the dock and paddled herself and her young son across the river. It was a remarkable feat, Shaw says; orangutans cannot swim, but Princess' power of reasoning enabled her to overcome her caution.

The red-headed apes also can be endearingly impish, as Shaw and Miller learned in their first encounter with an orangutan. Camp Leakey is located in the heart of Borneo's tropical Tanjung Puting National Park. To reach it, Shaw and Miller had to traverse a long dock from the Sekonyer River to the heart of the forest. Miller recalls, "I was probably one-third of the way up the dock when this young orangutan began walking toward me. This is a mega-fauna—a *big* animal!"

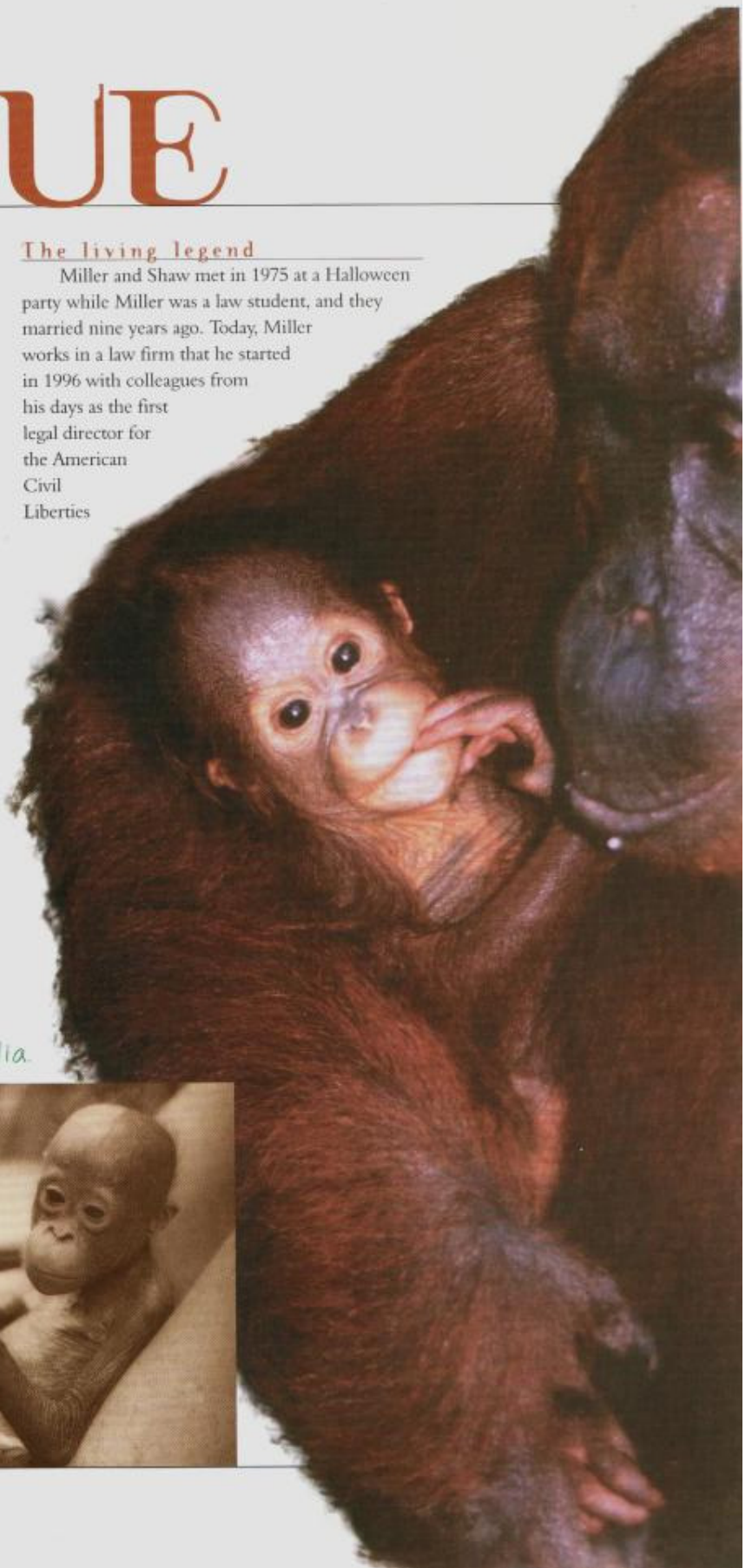
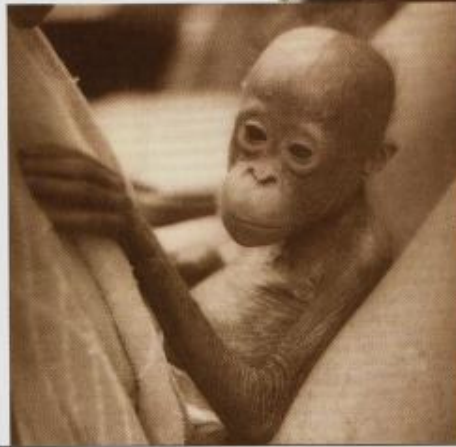
Miller became "a little freaked out" as the sturdy youngster approached, but then, he says, "It took a few steps and did a somersault. It took another couple of steps and did another somersault, and then it got to me, reached its hands out, grabbed my legs and started shaking them!"

Miller jerks a leg violently to demonstrate. He laughs, saying he finally realized, "It was trying to play!"

## The living legend

Miller and Shaw met in 1975 at a Halloween party while Miller was a law student, and they married nine years ago. Today, Miller works in a law firm that he started in 1996 with colleagues from his days as the first legal director for the American Civil Liberties

*DU alumni Barbara Zeek Shaw and David Miller nurse sick little Somalia.*



Union (ACLU) in Colorado, Shaw is the advocacy coordinator for the DU law school's Domestic Violence Civil Justice Project, a position she shares with a colleague to allow more time for orangutan work.

Their association with the legendary Galdikas began when Miller took a long-overdue sabbatical from the ACLU in 1992.

"It wasn't just a vacation," Miller points out. "We wanted to try to expand our interests. Barb had always been interested in the program run by Biruté, and the word was, 'Well, when you're over there, stop in.'"

They did stop in. And now, after countless hours in Galdikas' company, Shaw and Miller think of the orangutan conservationist as a warm friend, and they treasure moments like intense late-night conversations with her as insects drone noisily around the compound. But they acknowledge that, like Dian Fossey, she is a controversial figure, criticized for not publishing enough research and being too emotional about the animals she studies.

Miller and Shaw explain that the local politics are characterized by constantly shifting alliances that challenge conservation efforts. Meanwhile, Galdikas witnesses firsthand the shattering effects of legal and illegal logging, deforestation by fire for palm-oil plantations and gold mining. During the past two decades, the Indonesian rain forests have shrunk by 80 percent. Orangutans are particularly vulnerable to this habitat destruction because they reproduce only once every eight years and need a wide variety of foods. About 15,000 orangutans are left, compared with 50,000 in the 1970s. Since 1994, Somalia has been joined by 150 orphans, and more arrive daily.

"It's a crazy-making environment," Miller says. "Biruté's eccentricities speak to that."

Shaw agrees, but adds that if it weren't for Galdikas' success at negotiating the system, "there would not be one orangutan left in the park." They point out that of Leakey's three "Angels," Galdikas was the only trained scientist; she was enrolled in a doctoral program at UCLA when Leakey sent her to southeast Asia in the early 1970s to study wild orangutans. "Most of what we know about orangutans comes from her work," Shaw says.

Soon after Galdikas arrived in Borneo, government officials

and others began bringing her orphan orangutans, making rehabilitation, by necessity, part of her work. In *Reflections of Eden: My Years With the Orangutans of Borneo*, Galdikas explains, "I could continue only studying wild orangutans while they went extinct, or I could try conservation and maybe save some."

Miller says, "She might do herself a great favor if she would put aside her commitment for caring for the animals for six months and publish a paper, but who would she impress? She'd impress the scientific community, and in the meantime, the orangutans would die. So, who knows how to judge the best way for her to work?"

### Bringing light to the jungle

Since their first visit to Camp Leakey, Shaw and Miller have become staunch defenders of orangutans in the wild and those in Galdikas' care. Shaw spends four or five weeks each year in Borneo volunteering for the Orangutan Foundation International (OFI), the non-profit conservation organization that supports Galdikas' work. Miller joins her every other year. There, they care for orphaned baby orangutans and take notes on wild orangutans' activities, sometimes assisting with forest reports that map when different trees are fruiting and flowering.

Their efforts, however, extend well beyond on-site help. Shaw and Miller raise money, convince companies to donate medicines and equipment for OFI's volunteer veterinarian and undertake projects on behalf of sick and injured orangutans. Shaw, who is a semi-professional orangutan photographer, also uses her images of Somalia and other orangutans in school presentations or offers them to OFI for publications. She donates a few each year for fundraisers, and she sells them locally, using the money to help support additional conservation efforts. A few years ago, a local gallery sponsored a show featuring her work.

Gary Shapiro, OFI's vice-president, remarks, "I wish we could find more dedicated volunteers like David and Barb who follow through on their promises to get something of value completed. Their honesty and personal concern regarding humans as well as orangutans make them very special people to OFI."

Working with a small group of dedicated

Biruté Galdikas was the only trained scientist sent by Louis Leakey to study wild apes. Shaw captured the tireless conservationist in a rare moment of repose with two friends.



## Life as we know it

The World Conservation Union's newly released Red List of Threatened Species, published in September 2000, includes more than 11,000 plants and animals at risk of extinction. Habitat loss and degradation affect 89 percent of threatened birds, 83 percent of mammals and 91 percent of threatened plants.

Although the earth has already gone through five episodes of mass extinction, or "spasms," at intervals of about 30 million years, the current one has one noteworthy difference, says Brian Miller, coordinator of a conservation biology program jointly run by DU and the Denver Zoo. Miller notes that other spasms "were caused by an event or a very short time period—a meteor, for example. The sixth one has been caused by human

beings, almost exclusively."

He notes that the current rate of extinction, estimated at one to 70 species of plants and animals each day, equals the losses at the end of the Cretaceous period, when the dinosaurs became extinct.

Humans cause extinction by narrowing or significantly changing habitats. Clearing land for agricultural purposes, for instance, doesn't just affect the lives of existing animals and plants. It changes the complexity of the ecosystem, which interferes with the evolution of new species that might have taken the



place of dying ones. That's partly why Shaw and Galdikas (left) were concerned to discover illegal logging on the periphery of Camp Leakey last summer.

"Extinction is a natural process," admits

Robert Dores, professor and chair of DU's biology department. "Ninety-nine percent of life forms that have ever been on the planet are extinct. There's turnover all the time. But humans are certainly having an effect on biodiversity.

"We don't know the ramifications of what we are doing. But we may not like what happens," Dores says.

—R.H.

*For more background on orangutans, see the Orangutan Foundation International Web site, [www.orangutan.org](http://www.orangutan.org)*

Colorado volunteers, the couple have undertaken some ambitious projects, including the donation of a Zodiac boat and motor, which provided emergency transportation for both humans and orangutans at Camp Leakey. Miller and Shaw also brought composting equipment donated by a local Colorado company and started the practice in Camp Leakey and at the rehabilitation center.

In "the ultimate mutually satisfying project"—introducing hammocks to orangutans—Shaw and Miller transported special orangutan-proof hammocks for the rehabilitants' night cages. "If you put orangutans in a bare cage, they'll just sit on the floor—there is nothing to learn in that environment," Miller

explains. "Seeing orangutans lying in their hammocks, eating papaya and swinging themselves with the climbing ropes was such a treat,"

Shaw says.

Their greatest achievement, however, is a solar system that gives Camp Leakey clean, quiet power to run lights in the evening so researchers can compile notes from each day's work. "We decided to do it one night when we were in camp with Biruté,

talking by candlelight about things she really needed," Miller says.

The idea for the solar system evolved into a quarter-million-dollar project. Miller and Shaw contacted staff from the National Renewable Energy Laboratory in Golden, Colo., to design and supply the solar-collection system and to accompany them to Borneo to install it. Once in Camp Leakey, however, it seemed the project would never be realized because the unit needed to be covered by a chain-link cage to keep the orangutans out.

"Logistically, it's a nightmare to try to do a project there because you never know what's going to be available," Miller explains, noting that they had to search across the Java sea to find sturdy-enough fencing.

"When I look back now, the fact that we got that solar system built is astonishing," Shaw marvels. "We actually brought light to the jungle."

## On the horizon

Shaw and Miller now have turned to developing a circle of individuals who will help gather the equipment, supplies and medical expertise needed to run the veterinary clinic for a growing population of orphan orangutans. "We need the advice of pediatricians as well as vets and professionals who have access to medical-supply companies and other resources," Shaw explains.

She and Miller agree that seeing the benefits of their work justifies all the aggravations of their avocation. "Being in Borneo reinforces how destructive humans can be and shows how fragile life is," Shaw says, admitting the experience can breed frustration, if not cynicism. But the relationships—with dedicated conservationists, with local people willing to put their lives on the line for their forests and wildlife, and with the orangutans themselves—have become too meaningful to give up now.

"When you look into an orangutan's eyes, it looks back into yours, and there is a connection," Shaw says simply. ■

