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SUNDAY

The Elephant Story
A Home for Elephant Conservation

A REAL TRUNK SHOW

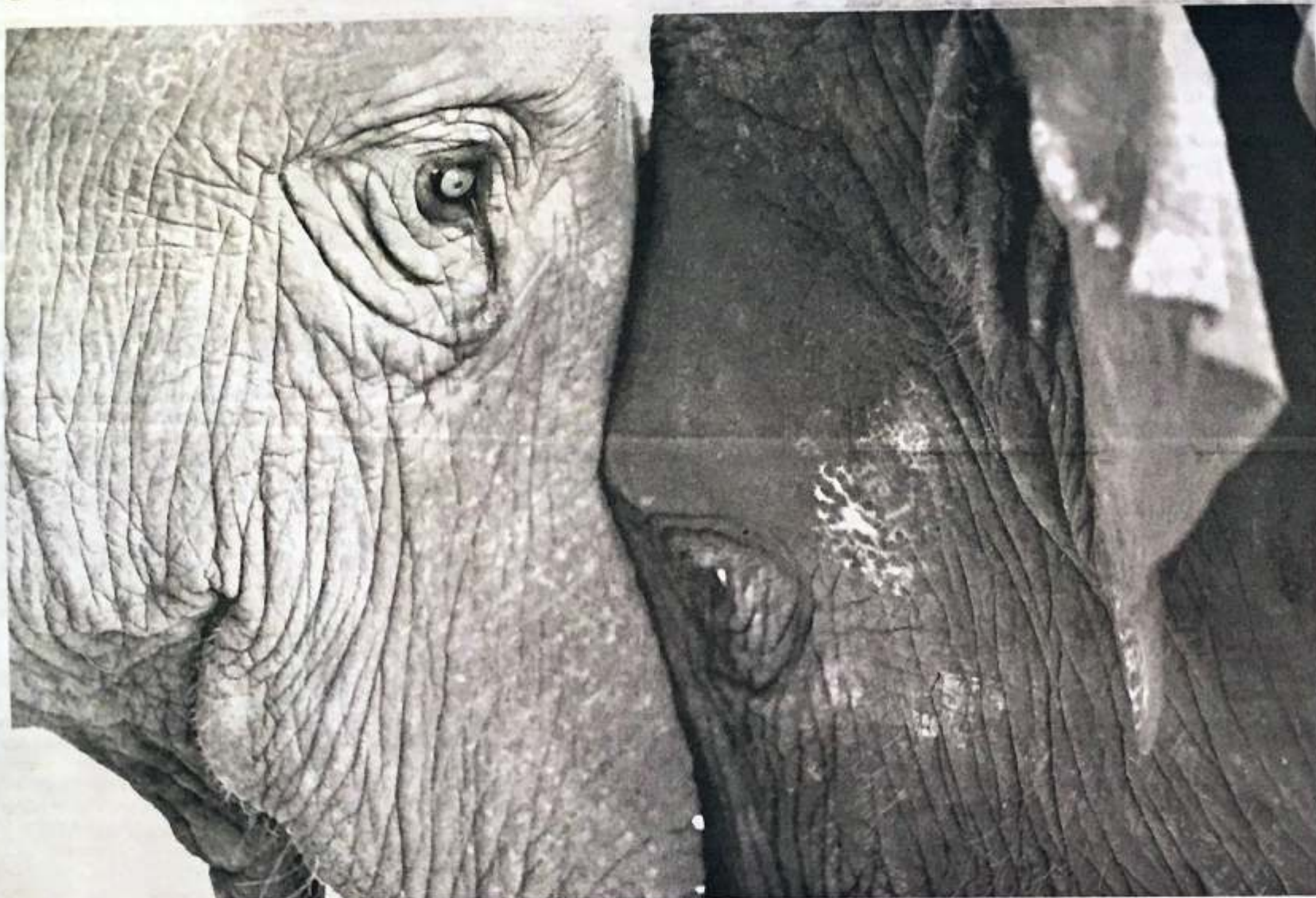
ELEPHANT-CENTRIC SHOP IN COMFORT SUPPORTS CONSERVATION EFFORTS WITH UNIQUE ARTISAN GIFTS. **PAGE 14**

JAKLE:

New 'Westworld' flips the movie script. **PAGE 4**

TRAVEL:

Hemisphere's oldest synagogue is in Curacao. **PAGE 8**



Courtesy photo

Two polo elephants rub heads during the 2016 Elephant Story Invitational Tournament in Thailand in June.

An elephant tale

By Steve Bennett
STAFF WRITER

COMFORT — A German Hill Country farming community established in 1854 is not where most of us would seek out elephant figures hand-carved from monkey wood or clothing woven by the hill tribes of Thailand and Vietnam.

So, when Ed and Joey Story opened The Elephant Story — a shop that stocks Asian artisan goods ranging from jewelry to

Hill Country couple is saving elephants with polo and poop coffee

furniture, as well as luxuries like elephant poop coffee (more on that later) — four years ago in downtown Comfort, some folks were left scratching their heads.

"When we first opened, we had one woman come in and ask if this was Republican Party headquarters," Joey Story recalls in a silky

Southern drawl. "I said, 'Oh, please. I'm a diehard Democrat from Kentucky. My mother would turn over in her grave.'"

Married 31 years, Joey, a vibrant redhead of 65, and her charismatic, 72-year-old husband — a lanky man prone to loud laughter and fond of stingray-skin cowboy boots

— owe their retail entrepreneurship to what 16th-century poet John Donne called "nature's great masterpiece."

Proceeds from the store benefit organizations involved in elephant conservation, including the Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation.

The aim is to get elephants and their handlers, or mahouts — usually paired at birth in what is a family business — out of crowded urban centers where they often



Courtesy Joey Story

Ed Story (in the green hat) leans down to smack a polo ball during an elephant polo tournament in Southeast Asia.

resort to street begging, away from illegal logging concerns and elephant shows, and into a more natural habitat.

"They are just remarkable, remarkable creatures," Ed Story said. "They're the only animal besides humans that have empathy. But there's no

space for elephants anymore. There's no wild for them, so we try to offer an alternative."

One alternative is the compound at Moo Baan Chang, which Ed describes as "the cradle of the elephant culture in Thailand." Located seven hours northeast of Bangkok on



Steve Bennett / San Antonio Express-News

Carved elephants and hand woven Asian baskets are among the items that can be found at the Elephant Story.

Coming next Sunday

Ed and Joey Story give readers an inside tour of their Hill Country home.

the Thai/Cambodian border, it's home to 200 elephants and their mahout families.

"That's the polo stock for all of Thailand," Ed said.

And he would know. In addition to the store, he raises money for elephant conservancy through an elephant polo tournament he founded in Thailand three years ago.

Elephant polo was first played in India around the turn of the 20th century by the members of the maharaja's

harem "to keep them busy," Ed said. But the World Elephant Polo Association was formed in 1982, dreamed up by some rich guys in a bar in St. Moritz, Switzerland, one a Scottish landowner and former Olympic toboggan racer.

Fifteen teams from all over the world, including one from Sweden, play in international sanctioned matches such as Ed's Thailand tournament.

"Unlike Africa, you don't have to worry about poachers killing elephants for their tusks in Asia," said Ed, who speaks fluent Thai. "That's anathema in Buddhist thought. But the big issue is their care and the sustainability of their lives."

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Watch a video of an elephant polo match and see more photos of The Elephant Story.

This year, the June tournament, which featured six teams representing eight countries from four continents in the three-day event, raised nearly \$40,000. With proceeds from sales at the Comfort store, the Storys generate around \$100,000 annually for elephant conservation.

Elephant polo is similar to regular pony-driven polo, except slower. It's the difference between turning a speed boat and an oil tanker.

The player sits on the elephant's back behind the mahout, who steers with his feet under the elephant's ears, and tries to whack a little white ball with an 8-foot mallet. Ed's mallets, from 70 to 90 inches in length, are custom-made with ash heads in Argentina, the horse sport's mecca.

"It's all about hand-eye coordination, so golfers do well," said Ed, who has constructed an elephant polo practice station behind the Comfort store, where he socks balls into a net while straddling what looks like an 8-foot wooden doghouse skyscraper.

ELEPHANT continues on J16

TOWN HALL MEETING

Thursday, October 13 | 7:00 p.m.

UTSA Downtown Campus, 501 César E. Chávez Blvd.
Buena Vista Building Theater

Property tax revenues: legislative limits vs. local control

Panelists:

Donna Campbell, State Senator

James Quintero, Texas Public Policy Foundation local gov. scholar

Nelson Wolff, Bexar County Judge

Mary M. Dennis, Live Oak Mayor

Seating is limited; doors close at 6:45 p.m.



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Free parking is available in unmarked spaces of Lot D-3 beneath IH-35

ELEPHANT

From page J15

Elephant polo is not without its critics; some animal activists have called it "wildlife exploitation."

But John Roberts, director of the Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation, one of the beneficiaries of the Storys' fundraising, says flatly that "polo is not bad for the elephants."

"Is it exploitation? Yes, of course it is exploitation!" he wrote in an email from Thailand. "But everything you do with captive elephants is exploitation. By working with these elephants, who currently spend all day on short chains with little food, the project not only improves their daily life by providing fodder, exercise and enrichment, it also ensures funds raised go back to reducing the number elephants in this position during the generations to come."

"As exploitation goes this is acceptable — it removes elephants from unhealthy forms of being exploited and actively helps ensure fewer elephants are exploited in the future."

Ed and Joey Story are helping elephants "the hard way," Roberts wrote.

"It is a long-term project that won't show full effects for years to come. There is very little glory and even less gratitude in working directly with this community. However, this is ground zero for elephant owning — and therefore elephant problems — in Thailand, so if we are to help, then this is the place to do it."

Ed Story, a native of Hillsboro and a graduate of Trinity University with a master's degree in business administration from the University of Texas at Austin, encountered Asia in 1968 working for Esso, supplying fuel for the military during the Vietnam War.

Today, he is CEO of SOCO International, a London-based oil and gas exploration company with extensive holdings in Asia and Africa. Because of



Photos by Steve Bennett / San Antonio Express-News

Joey and Ed Story, shown at their home in Center Point, opened *The Elephant Story* on Comfort four years ago.

Ed's business interests, the Storys live about half the year in the Siam Hotel in Bangkok, and make frequent trips to India and Europe.

They have homes in Houston and Oxford, Mississippi, as well as a penthouse in Ulan Bator, Mongolia, with a 360-degree view of the surrounding mountains.

But Comfort is home.

"This is where we're registered to vote," says Ed.

The couple live in nearby Center Point in a Lake | Flato Architects house on an 1,100-foot mesa in the center of 1,000 acres of rolling Hill Country scrub and live oak, with several big white Great Pyrenees dogs running around, along with eight burros (named for Democratic couples, such as Eleanor and Franklin), and a herd of 75 longhorns (some named for Texas musicians such as Selena and Stevie Ray Vaughan).

The ranch is called Rams-horn, so they also have 30 sheep, "who are free to call themselves whatever they like," says Ed.

"I'm not fond of sheep, but we had to have some because of the name," says Joey, who, in addition to being the chief buyer and designer for the Elephant Story shop, also runs a business called DS Squared with partner Bobby Dent that

restores old and historic buildings.

The Storys own most of Center Point's tiny downtown, which was boarded up buildings when they arrived. They've restored several buildings, including a bank, a post office and a general store for use as event rental space and bed-and-breakfast properties.

"I just love old buildings," Joey said. "We think (Center Point) could someday make a really cute little community like Marfa."

Home from Asia in 1974, Ed Story was staying with friends in Boerne and looking for a home base. He began in Boerne, "which was too expensive even then," he recalled, and worked his way out, finally landing on the hill top where his house stands now.

"I bought it and closed within five days," he said. "The views were the deal clincher."

Since then he has bought six more adjoining parcels to make up Ramshorn ranch.

In Comfort, two immaculately restored Texas historic landmarks house the Elephant Story, which opened in 2012 in the old Karger Building. It was built in 1913 as the pool hall for the neighboring Ingenhuett-Karger Saloon, a gorgeous limestone block building designed and built in 1891 by renowned



Black Ivory coffee is made from beans that have traveled through an elephant's digestive system.

San Antonio architect Alfred Giles. During Prohibition, it served as a confectionary, a grocery and an ice cream parlor, according to the plaque on its front wall.

"They are just good people," said Brenda Seidensticker, past president of the Comfort Heritage Foundation. "I mean, they are wealthy, but they are very unpretentious, will talk to anybody. They restored those two buildings just because, and I think the store was an afterthought. They have really improved Comfort as a whole and made (High Street) look much better."

Joey Story, whom her husband calls "the consummate shopper," stocks the Elephant Story with a variety of hand-crafted merchandise from markets in southeast Asia and India.

"I think it's very important to support the artists and craftsman from all these small communities and villages," Joey said.

A very short list of the shop's inventory includes water buffalo horn necklaces from Vietnam, Lao textiles woven in Cambodia, Kantha scarves and Injiri ("real India") dresses from India, Jaab cards hand-made and hand painted on mulberry paper from Thailand, and clothing such as denim and army fatigue jackets inset with colorful fabrics woven by Akha and Hmong hill tribeswomen.

And if you need a unique, handwoven basket, or just

about anything with an elephant motif, from a T-shirt to an end table, head to Comfort.

"It's so different, and it's in Comfort!" said Debbie Dennis, owner of Huckleberry's, a gallery and gift shop in thriving downtown Comfort across the street from The Elephant Story. "We like it because it's so very unique. And the Storys are such nice people, so down to earth."

The Elephant Story claims to be the only place in the Western Hemisphere where patrons can enjoy Black Ivory Coffee, made from Thai Arabica beans fed to elephants and passed through their digestive system, then retrieved by their lucky mahouts.

The resulting cup of coffee is said to be one of the smoothest, most savory cups on the planet because enzymes in the elephant's system break down proteins that cause bitterness.

The "in-store service experience," brewed in a Royal Belgian coffeemaker (which you can take home for \$250) costs \$50 for 14 ounces of brew, which will serve four demitasse cups. One small packet of coffee beans, enough for 14 ounces of coffee, costs \$40.

"It's very flavorful and complex," Ed Story said. "And then you add sugar, and it becomes even more interesting."

An interesting brew for a couple whose whole life is built about interesting.

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