

She wants to take a tiger by the tail

By LYNN ORR

Cindy Richards' mother is a little worried about her daughter's cool rooming situation. Sylvester and Jenny may be all right, but the two leopards are something to meow about.

Ms. Richards, 19, will attend a one-month seminar to learn all about training wild animals this August. Sylvester and Jenny (affectionate names for two wolves) and the leopards are slated as her roommates at the Howling Wolf Lodge in Leggett, Calif.

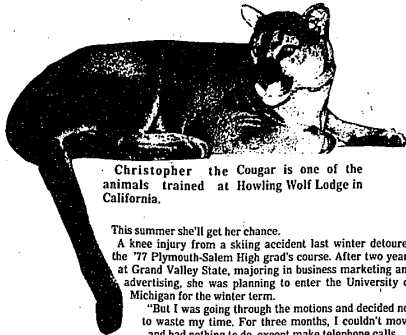
"I don't know if they're going to be in cages," she said. But she's not worried.

"My mom's afraid I'm going to get mauled by a lion, but you can get killed in a car too. I'd rather get eaten by a lion," she explained.

DAVID AND MILANNE Richards of Plymouth Township have one consolation. Pat Derby, a 20-year veteran of the business, will be on hand to supervise.

And Christopher can testify to her expertise. He's the big cat that sells Cougars for Ford's Lincoln-Mercury division. Ms. Richards knows all about him.

Throughout her childhood she told her father, a Ford employee, that she wanted to "train that kitty."



Christopher the Cougar is one of the animals trained at Howling Wolf Lodge in California.

This summer she'll get her chance.

A knee injury from a skiing accident last winter derailed the '77 Plymouth-Salem High grad's course. After two years at Grand Valley State, majoring in business marketing and advertising, she was planning to enter the University of Michigan for the winter term.

"But I was going through the motions and decided not to waste my time. For three months, I couldn't move and had nothing to do, except make telephone calls.

"I decided to try and find out who trained these animals. I called around to different ad agencies, and finally called the auto show."

At that point she connected with Ms. Derby, who promised to send information about her summer seminars at her orphanage for wild animals.

After two months of correspondence, Ms. Richards was set on her westward course. Other than the plane ticket, the seminar is free. In exchange for working at the lodge, waiting on tables and taking care of the animals, she'll attend classes for about five hours a day, learning all about affection training.

MS. DERBY doesn't use electric shocks or other devices to coax her animals into performing.

"She basically shows people how she and the animals get along. She wrestles with them."

That's not as difficult as it sounds, according to Ms. Richards. Ms. Derby simply sits behind Christopher and tickles his tail to get him to flick it for the commercial.

For that ferocious pawing action, she simply plays with the big cat.

"It's all a game," Ms. Richards explained. "But you always have to remember that they're wild animals. If you forget that, you get into trouble."

Her goal is to work with Christopher or his twin at the end of the summer. During the last week of the seminar, interns are required to handle an animal of their choice, including unloading the animal,

presenting it to the audience and perhaps getting a little performance.

Although the wild animal orphanage includes elephants, great apes, wolves and hyenas, the big cats — leopards, cheetahs, lions and tigers — are Ms. Richards' favorites.

Not quite household pets like her bunny and kitty, but cats just the same, many of them were brought to the orphanage because their owners discovered they need a bit more care than Kitty Litter and scratching posts.

Ms. Derby doesn't believe in taking wild animals out of their environment.

"She tries to make it a little better for the ones that have been captured," a philosophy Ms. Richards shares.

Looking a little further down the career road doesn't exactly show a whole lot of promise. Ms. Derby hires some of the best interns as employees, but "that's a slim chance."

She hopes to stay in California, get a job to support herself and meet some people in the field — hoping for that big break that draws thousands to Hollywood every year.

Mom and Dad may be in for some harrowing times, but her brother and sister can't wait for her departure. They're anxious for some extra space at home.

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