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Wildlife rescuer dies after wreck

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BROOKSVILLE - Hernando County animal hero Judy Schwartz died Wednesday from injuries she received the day before in a crash at Spring Hill Drive and U.S. 41.

Schwartz, 60, was a state licensed wildlife rehabilitator who has spent the last 15 years rescuing injured and orphaned animals in Hernando County. Jim Jablon, who is also a licensed rehabilitator, joined Judy to form Wildlife Rehab of Hernando, a non-profit organization that takes in animals that need special attention before they can be released back into the wild. Jablon said that even Schwartz's last act was to help animals. He said that when the crash occurred she was on her way home from picking up a box of frozen mice. The mice are food for Schwartz's rescued raptors.

Schwartz lived not far from the crash site on 16 acres on Rackley Road, near Powell Road and U.S. 41. Jablon has 14 acres in Spring Hill. They both used their land as sanctuaries for rescued animals.

According to a Florida Highway Patrol news release, Schwartz was northbound on U.S. 41 about 4:35 p.m. Tuesday, when a southbound vehicle crossed the centerline and hit her head-on. The report states that Kimberly M. Johnson, 46, of Holiday, was driving the other vehicle, a 2005 Toyota sedan, when she crossed into the path of Schwartz's 1987 Chevrolet pick-up truck. Johnson and her passenger, 47-year-old Paul Johnson, were both taken by helicopter to Tampa General Hospital. Their conditions were unavailable Thursday.

Schwartz was taken by air to St. Joseph's Hospital. She died about 11 a.m. the next morning, leaving behind her husband of more than 40 years, Irv Schwartz.

FHP spokesman Trooper Larry Coggins Jr. said Schwartz was the first Hernando County traffic fatality in the new year.

Jablon said Schwartz's death has left the fate of many animals up in the air. He's calling for volunteers to take care of the animals, some of which must be cared for by trained or certified rescuers. Anyone interested in helping out can call Jablon at (352) 279-3600. He said Schwartz never met an animal she wouldn't help.

"She could never say no to anything that needed help, from a dog to a mouse to a newborn bunny," he said. "Her heart was huge."

Jablon said Schwartz had a certain way with animals. She connected with them like few people do.

"Some people love animals. Some people love people. Judy loved animals more than people," he said. "She was very devoted and gave it 110 percent. There was no stopping her. When she was sick it didn't matter. She went out and worked anyway." Much of her day followed a schedule of feeding times for various animals.

"It was 16 hours a day, every day," Jablon said. He said one of her pet projects was making sure gopher tortoises were relocated when their homes were endangered by new construction. Judy Volkman, a Brooksville woman who occasionally volunteered for Schwartz, said she'd miss her friend. "We've lost a wonderful person here in Hernando County."

Saving animals was her calling

About 150 people gathered to remember a wildlife worker whose life was cut short in a traffic accident.

By LOGAN NEILL, Times Correspondent
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HERNANDO BEACH - It was fitting that as Judy Schwartz's friends and family gathered to say their final goodbyes, a small flock of gulls darted low overhead. The sight brought a smile to many of the forlorn faces and the notion that perhaps someone was smiling down upon them.

About 150 people gathered Sunday afternoon at Linda Pedersen Park to honor Schwartz, who died Jan. 4 at 60 from injuries suffered in a traffic accident and was known for her work in rehabilitating injured wildlife in Hernando County.

"She was such an amazing person," her friend and fellow wildlife rehabilitator Jim Jablon told the assembled throng. "No matter how sick or badly injured an animal was, you knew that when it was in Judy's hands there was always hope."

Jablon, who organized the memorial, said that his friend probably wouldn't have approved of the fuss being made over her.

"She didn't do what she did to gain attention," Jablon said. "Helping wildlife was just something she was driven to do. It was her mission in life."

Schwartz lived most of her life in Pinellas County, where she and her husband, Irv, owned and operated several Burger King restaurants. Twelve years ago, the couple moved to a rural area off Powell Road, where Judy set up an animal rehabilitation clinic.

Penny Boehme, a friend of Schwartz's and a licensed wildlife rehabilitator from St. Petersburg, said Schwartz was an expert at patching up tortoises, hawks and owls that had been hit by cars. At any given time, she had upward of 50 animals in her care. Once healed, the animals were returned to the wild.

"She treated them as if they were her kids," Boehme said. "She would nurture them with love, but she respected that once they were better they needed to find their own way back into the world."



[Times photo: Will Vragovic]

Jim Jablon, center left, spreads Judy Schwartz's ashes over Jenkin's Creek at Linda Pedersen Park while Schwartz's husband, Irv, center right, holds the urn. Irv's sister, Florence Schwartz, left, and Jim's wife, Terri Jablon, look on. No matter how sick an animal was, Jim Jablon said, "you knew that when it was in Judy's hands there was always hope."

At the time of her death, Schwartz had several animals that were ready for release. As the memorial service ended, volunteers brought out a Cooper's hawk and a Red-Shouldered hawk and set them free.

"Seeing those birds made it a little easier for me to get through this day," Jablon said. "I know that wherever those birds go, they'll be taking Judy's comfort and care with them."