

Steve Karlin and Susie Bear
by Anne Veh

Over the past year Pavi Mehta, Chris Johnnidis and I have been visiting a wildlife sanctuary in Half Moon Bay to listen to and record the remarkable animal stories and personal journey of founder, Steve Karlin. Sitting on his back porch one day last spring, Steve casually alerted us to the piercing cries of a young red-tailed hawk above and motioned us, mid-sentence, to look beyond the fence at a bobcat moving stealthily in the tall grass. To be in Steve's company is to be reminded that the vast play of nature is all around us, and visible if only we cultivate our ears to hear and our eyes to see it. Together over many months we experienced an expanded space of listening and learning what it means to be in relationship with a wild animal.

Steve Karlin founded Wildlife Associates more than 30 years ago, a sanctuary for animals and humans, where animals are the teachers. Located on more than 120 acres of sacred Native American land that stretches from the forested hills of Half Moon Bay to the Pacific Ocean, Wildlife Associates provides a safe home for more than 50 wild animals (including an American bald eagle, a golden eagle, a Harris hawk, an Andean condor, a mountain lion, a sloth, an African porcupine, and an Arctic fox), no longer equipped to survive in the wild. Each animal welcomed into the sanctuary experiences a special ritual with Steve. He communicates to them how sorry he is they can no longer live in the wild and promises them a safe home where their needs will be met for the rest of their lives. At the sanctuary, each of these animals will serve to educate, delight, inspire, and even heal, the community. Over time Steve and his staff form relationships with these beings and a mutual trust is developed that allows the animals to step into their new role as teachers.

Wildlife Associates brings its amazing programs, where animals are the teachers, to 300,000 students throughout the San Francisco Bay Area each year. They also have developed transformational programs for at-risk youth based at the sanctuary itself.

We learned more about Steve during a special gathering for ServiceSpace volunteers in March of 2012. John Malloy, a ServiceSpace member with more than ten years of friendship and collaboration with Steve in developing several at-risk youth programs, organized a visit to the sanctuary. We were joined by ServiceSpace co-leaders, Viral and Pavi Mehta.

As a young boy growing up in Cleveland, Ohio, Steve had the extraordinary experience of being welcomed into a family of robins. They lived in a tree in an empty lot adjacent to his home. Each day Steve would climb that tree and sit with the two robins. Over time the birds accepted him as if he was part of their family. One day the two robins flew off and left Steve with their babies. They had never left their babies alone before, Steve remarked. He was eight years old at the time and deeply moved that the robins would entrust him this way. This experience set Steve on his lifelong path of educating children (and people of all ages) to better perceive their relationship with the living world. Drawing

on his own deep experiences, and using children's natural connection with animals, he pioneered a methodology in which the animals themselves are the teachers. As he expresses it, these educational experiences need to be transformative. And they need to bridge the chasm between the human realm and the wild world of nature. In every program, the animals and their stories are used to teach children not just about the biology of life but also about empathy, caring and the profound interconnections that link all of us together.

One of the most important animal companions in Steve's life was Susie Bear, a 330-pound American black bear. He says simply that Susie Bear was his most powerful teacher and a beloved friend. One of the most extraordinary stories about Susie Bear began many years ago at an elementary school in the East Bay of the San Francisco Bay Area.

—Anne Veh

Steve Karlin: The school in the East Bay was not out of the ordinary at all. The animals didn't act like anything special was going to happen that day. We were going to do our All American Wildlife program, with the California black bear, the timber wolf, and the American bald eagle—a very powerful learning program.

Before the assembly program started, a fifth-grade teacher came up and told us that one of his students would probably cry during the program, as two of her grandparents had passed away a couple of weeks earlier. The teacher explained that being Native American, Daweela believed that the bear carries the spirits of departed beings. If she saw Susie Bear, it would be like seeing her ancestors who had just passed. He wasn't really clear in his explanation, but I knew something was going to happen that day.

Normally, we do two assembly programs: one for the kindergarten through second or third grade, and then one for fourth, fifth and sixth graders. After the program ends, we typically put the animals in the van and safely make our exit. This day we couldn't leave right away. And within minutes the blacktop area was mobbed with kids going to their parents cars or to their bicycles, or using their own little feet to get home. We knew it was going to be another 15 to 30 minutes before we could get off the playground.

The same teacher came up to me and said something about the Native American girl, Daweela—that she had been very moved by the assembly program and he had encouraged her to talk to me. He disappeared and Daweela walked up. She thanked me and we continued talking a little. I said, "Would you like to speak to your ancestors?"

"What do you mean?" said Daweela.

"Well, Susie Bear," I said. "Would you like to talk to Susie Bear?"

"I thought you said animals don't speak English," she said.

"Yes, but animals have their own language," I said. Normally, I never open the van and let people peer in. The animals are in their enclosures, where they feel safe, and we don't want to upset them. And we don't want the bear to think she can just go to anybody and say hello. But something overrode that. On that day I knew something powerful was going to happen. So I opened the door of the van and looked at Susie Bear; it was as if she was waiting. She came right over, like she had an agenda, as if she knew Daweela—as if something was supposed to happen between them.

First, she came over to me, and said hello in her normal way, "Hi Steve, How are you doing?" And she licked me in the face.

She still had the power of the bear in her. And it was our relationship; I had my power and she had her power. It was a very loving relationship. But when she looked at Daweela, who was standing next to me, Susie Bear became very soft. Her eyes even closed half way. She put her head down and nestled it against Daweela's head and shoulder, as if she was saying hello to her baby. It was amazing being that close and watching what was going on between a 330-pound black bear and a third grader.

Daweela was speaking to Susie Bear. It was barely audible and her face was almost

right in the bear's ear. Susie Bear was against her shoulder and just totally limp, sitting there, not moving, concentrating on her every vowel, everything coming out of her mouth, eyes half shut. After this, Daweela had tears in her eyes. I said, "Daweela, why are you crying?"

She said, "Susie Bear told me that the bears just want to be left alone and people keep going into the woods where they live and killing them, and they don't understand why. They just want to be left alone."

I stood there in silence and in awe of what was happening in front of me. Daweela then turned back to Susie Bear and started to talk to her again. Part of me wanted to listen and hear the conversation and part of me knew it was private between her and Susie.

She then turned and looked at me again and was crying even more. I said to Daweela, "Why are you crying now?"

She looked at me and said, "You know the pledge you have us say at the end of the assembly program? I will always protect the earth and all the creatures on it. I will have respect for all life, including my fellow humans so there will always be a balance in nature. During the pledge, I saw three kids crossing their fingers."

Daweela couldn't understand why anyone would not stand behind protecting the animals and the earth. I said, "Don't worry Daweela. It doesn't take everybody; it does not even take half of the people. It all starts with a small group of people and ideas to change the earth. It will happen in our lifetime."

Daweela just looked at Susie Bear and said, "Thank you, Susie Bear." She looked at me, gave me a hug and just went along her way home, just like any third grader. But it wasn't complete. I felt there was something else that hadn't happened, but I didn't know what it was. I just watched her depart.

Well, these things don't surprise me. They amaze me. There's a difference, because when something surprises you, you didn't expect it. I've seen many, many wonderful things happen over the years with these wonderful living beings that I've had the privilege of sharing my life with. I've also learned that my place is to facilitate, not to get overly directive, thinking I'm the one with the power.

People forget that in the fine art of communicating, the most important thing is to listen. If you're not listening, then you're making up in your head what's going on in front of you. You're just seeing your projections, which are all the things you've already experienced in your life. If you learn to listen, through being quiet, through a sense of full authenticity, you begin not only to hear, but to see what's really going on around you.

So Daweela left. I knew something amazing had happened. And I knew it wasn't complete yet, but didn't know why. There was just this little feeling. So I went on about my life.

About two or three months later, I went to the Stanford University Powwow—just on a whim. I'm walking around, and here comes this little girl from the far end of the field, all in her beautiful Indian regalia—dress, beautiful top, feathers—just running over and yelling, "Animal man! Bear man! Animal man! Bear man!" "And I'm thinking, "Who is this?"

She gives me a hug, and says, "You have to come talk to my mommy and tell her the story because I don't think she believes me."

I said, "Oh, Daweela, it's you."

So she grabs me by the hand and pulls me along through the crowd. Her mother, who I guess is an artisan, was restocking her table of native crafts she was selling. And Daweela says, "Mommy, mommy, this is the bear man! This is the animal man!"

Daweela's mother stops and looks at me and says, "You have to tell me the story, because I want to hear what actually happened."

I told her the story, and afterwards there was silence. Then she says, "This is a different story than I heard from a third grader. This is very important. Do you have time to come with me? We need to tell my husband."

And she took me through the crowd to the drumming circle, where seven or eight

Native Americans were in the middle of a drumming and singing session. She walks over and starts talking to him as he's hitting the drum. He's trying to pretend she's not there and keeps drumming. So she grabs him by the ear and pulls him out of the drumming circle. He's not too happy. He comes over and says, "What's going on?" She says, "Be quiet and listen. He has a story to tell you about Daweela."

So I tell him the story and his whole facial expression changes. He says, "This is not the same story I heard from a third grader. In our belief system, when we see a bear, it would be equivalent to a Christian seeing Jesus. It's very profound what has occurred; we need to talk to our medicine man and find out what to do next. Can you give me your information so we can contact you?" I said sure, sure.

So we talked a little bit, then he went back to the drum circle. The mother went back to her artisan table, and Daweela went back to being a third grader.

A few days later, I received a phone call from the father. He said, "We need to do a ceremony with Susie Bear that was given to us by our medicine man. It's very important that we do it right away. How soon can we do it?"

I replied, "Well, just name the time."

He says, "How about tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow works."

When they arrived, we talked a little and then I asked, "What's the ceremony you've been instructed to do?" They explained that Daweela was given a special prayer to sing. They had to say a prayer and she was to put a pinch of cornmeal on Susie Bear's head, then say another prayer and put a couple of fingers full of cornmeal on Susie Bear's nose. After that, Daweela would say another prayer and put the cornmeal on Susie Bear's tongue, and finally say another prayer and put cornmeal on Susie Bear's front paws.

Now, when they mentioned the front paws I got a little concerned. Susie Bear is an ex-movie star; she was on Grizzly Adams, Wilderness Family and tons of movies. In the movies, though, they actually have three, four or five bears that all look similar. One bear runs, one does an attack scene, one growls, one goes down on it's hind legs. And one bear just hangs out and eats, and is very calm (and can hang out with expensive actors and actresses). That was Susie Bear. She was the bear that was safe to be around people. She was smart, and smart enough to know she didn't have to do everything people asked of her. I believe Susie Bear was thirteen years old when she came to me.

What I learned about Susie Bear's story is that her mother was killed by poachers in the wild and Susie Bear jumped off a cliff to get away. She was just a little cub. A backpacker found her and took her to a wildlife sanctuary, where she was nursed back to health. Then, somehow, she worked her way into the motion- picture industry and was cared for by this wonderful woman who worked with live animals in the industry. Then somehow on the set, Susie Bear was attacked by a large cat, like a jaguar or a leopard, and suffered injuries to her feet. Unfortunately, every time the lady told the story it changed.

I don't know what happened, but her front feet were very sensitive. I got to the point where I could touch them, because you need to be able to touch every part of these animals to give them medical checks. If their paws are hurting, you have to look at them. So very slowly I work with all the animals so they don't even mind me touching and manipulating them in any position. It takes a lot of patience and a lot of bonding between you and the animal.

So I said, "Whoa. Let's watch what happens and keep it safe." That's my main priority there—to keep everything safe.

I asked the parents if they wanted to come into Susie Bear's enclosure, but they said, "No, this isn't about us. This is about Daweela." I said okay.

So Daweela and I went into the enclosure. Susie Bear walked over and said hi to me, with a kind of excited look in her eyes, like, "How are you doing, Steve?" and kissed me on the face. Then she took a step over to Daweela, sat down next to her, and her whole

body became soft like a mother's body becomes soft nursing a baby. There was just an amazing connection. I mean her whole body just went soft. I don't know if anyone else noticed, but I know Susie so well. She just leaned against Daweela, put her head on her as if they were family members—really, really close.

Daweela said a few words. She had a baggie with some cornmeal in it. And Susie Bear moved to a position where she was directly in front of Daweela. Susie Bear sat down, looking directly in her face. Daweela's head was probably about six inches from her chest. And as soon as she was finished saying her prayer, Susie Bear bowed her head so Daweela didn't have to reach too far to sprinkle cornmeal on Susie Bear's head.

Then Daweela said another prayer, which I could not hear, nor was I really listening to it, because I was just trying to be a facilitator and be very conscious and clear. She said another prayer and Susie Bear immediately stuck her nose toward Daweela. Daweela reached in the bag and pulled out some more cornmeal and put it on Susie Bear's nose.

Then Daweela said another prayer, and Susie Bear opened her mouth and stuck her tongue out. And Daweela, with her third-grade fingers, sprinkled some cornmeal on her tongue. Susie Bear brought it back into her mouth and sat there and waited for the next prayer.

Daweela said the next prayer, which was longer than the first three. She reached into the bag and pulled out some cornmeal, and Susie Bear, very slowly, slid both her feet out about a foot, to a position a bear does not sit in naturally, but a position where it would be very easy for Daweela, without moving much, to put cornmeal on the top of her paws. Daweela put cornmeal on top of the paws and then Susie Bear brought her paws back under her body in a normal sitting position. Then Susie Bear kissed her in the face.

I looked over Daweela's shoulder and her mother and father had tears in their eyes, because they saw what I was seeing, too.

Then Daweela, like a third grader, you know, when the amazing thing is over, it's over. They just go on with their life [Steve laughs]—as if they can do it again if they want, with pure delight and expectations for the universe to be at their beck and call at any moment [more laughter]. She just walked out of the enclosure very slowly and I followed her. I looked Susie Bear in the eyes, put my hand on her head, and kissed her on the nose. Susie Bear looked back at me like she was thanking me as well.

Daweela's parents and I talked awhile. They said that experience was going to make them really get more into their ways. And they said something about Daweela being picked at a young age to be a medicine woman when she grew older.

I always wondered how Susie Bear knew to do those things. You know, it always stuck in my head a little bit—how did she know to do that?

A Question

I had a very beautiful, wonderful mentor who was a Native American Lakota in his mid-to-late 70s. He was a wisdom keeper for his people. I decided to ask him, because he saw me with the animals, and I had known him for about three years at this point. He used to stay at the ranch, sometimes a month at a time.

I told him the story, and he smiled. Then I said, "Can I ask you a question? Do you know how the bear knew to do that? Or did the bear know how to do that?"

He started laughing and he says, "Geez, Steve, sometimes I wonder about you." [Steve laughs] He says, "These are very basic things here. This ceremony has been around for thousands of years. My ancestors and other tribes have been doing these ceremonies for thousands of years; it's not something we've made up."

I said, "Yes..."

He continues, "Don't you think the bears know them by now? It's part of the bear consciousness."

"Ohh..." And that Western part of me said, "That makes no damn sense whatsoever!" [Steve laughs] You know, having the bear know these things, and having the bear pass

these down from generation to generation—how's that? And I just started laughing at myself and realized that part of me will never know that it makes sense.

The Mystery of Relationship

Susie Bear was with me for thirteen years. And during that time, the relationship I had with her broke boundaries of what I thought relationships were about, and the depths that you can go to. There is a connection you make with an animal that goes beyond words, a power, a communication like a mother has with her infant. It's the communication my mother had when we were upstairs playing, and she would yell up the steps, "Okay kids, you better stop what you are doing because in two minutes someone is going to start crying." And two minutes later, someone hit their head or would start crying. How did she know that was going to happen? My mother would always do stuff like that. She primed me for listening to the intuitive ways of seeing things.

Then living in an ashram offered me a completely different way of seeing the world, especially in my formative years. I was barely in my early 20s when I moved into the ashram. I was not inflicted with the social norms and the way society thinks. At that time, my early years of adulthood were spent in a spiritual community. Getting up, doing meditation, going off and doing service, then coming back for the evening meditation. The whole experience showed me the inner realm of existence.

Even today this is my core, my anchor. Doing meditation, going deep within, is my anchor, which is the way I view reality. I see a lot of things going on that people base their lives around, and it's so transitory; it's a puff of smoke, and can be gone, literally, and what do you have left? Nothing. But the thing that will be here always is what's driving your breath inside, that thing, the difference between life and death.

When I connect to my animals, that's what I'm looking for. When I look into their eyes, I'm not looking at, "Oh, you are so cute," even though they are so cute. "Oh, how beautiful and magnificent you are!" Instead of seeing that, I merge with that. I go deep inside. Because until I reach that part inside that is the same as me inside, I don't know that animal. I don't know that human. That's why, most of the time, names wash through me, because I need to know that person. Even today, with those kids [referring to the at-risk youth program], I got to know some of them. I got to see them shift and change, and they opened up. They invited me in to get to know who they are on a deep, core level.

In working with animals, I think you do the most service to them and yourself by meeting them on that equal level. Whatever word you put on it, "soul." Certain words have certain connotations to people, religious and beyond religion. That awareness, that consciousness that the animals bring to this world is based upon the source, based upon the zero point, based upon the experience of the divine inside.

Inside of the divine of the bear, and inside the divine of me, we were very strong together. It was like we were meant to be together in this lifetime. It's like we found each other.

And she challenged me to see if I was willing to get into that relationship with her. The first time I went into Susie Bear's enclosure, she was standing on her rear legs and challenging me to the core. She could have killed me. Easy. A 330-pound bear. I had to go beyond the physical realm, because this human body is set up to protect itself. That's why we have automatic responses. So there was danger in front of me and my responses told me to run out of the cage.

These animals are not humans. This is where a lot of humans misunderstand animals. They think they're like little humans, like a part of the family. They are part of the family, but they are not human.

There are societal things and social and cultural norms that animals have—things that are very similar to human things—so we can have similar experiences with them in our lives. And they understand certain things about us. But if you move to the core, they know

it. Many of them will resist at first, because that's real trust. Many humans, if not most, never open up to that part of themselves, even to a mate. A lot of people get married, and after twenty years they still don't know who their spouse is. Some people do. They go deep inside to do that.

With Susie, it took years and years to attain that trust. Bringing her out of her enclosure, walking with her, taking her into the schools for assembly programs and educational programs. Sometimes she was hilarious. She would do things that were so funny. In this one program she was on the stage with me, and the vice principal was sitting in the front row. We're up on the stage and there are 1500 high school kids in the audience. I started talking about the rainforest, and every time I said rain, she went to the bathroom on the stage. Right out of the cage, right on the stage! The kids are hysterically laughing, so I let them laugh for five minutes.

I said, "Okay, where were we?" And she turned her back toward the audience and I continued, "We were talking about the rain." And she urinated in an arc right into the lap of the vice principal in the front row. The kids went nuts. They were falling out of their chairs. Ten minutes of hysterical laughter. Only a bear can get away with that type of behavior.

Passage

Susie Bear and I would go on walks together, and when we would sit together on the trail she would put her arm around my shoulder and kiss me on the face. We would talk a lot and she would fall asleep with her head in my lap. I would fall asleep with my head against her chest. She would hug me. I wasn't sure if this was a platonic relationship or if this was a husband and wife relationship, or mother-son, because she seemed to be teaching me lessons all the time. Even today I wake up sometimes and I thank Susie Bear, because I finally understand something that she taught me. It took me years to finally reach a point where I saw what a lesson it was.

At one point, I started noticing it was harder and harder to leash her up and get her into the van to go to the schools. And one day she refused, which wasn't her at all. So we palpated her and found that she had a lump in her breast. She had to go in for an operation, and they thought they got it all. But there were months and months of spending time with her, healing up her wound. Then she got back to health and started to teach in the programs again.

Then a year and a half later, she started showing signs of being ill again. We took her to this fancy equine place where they have this huge X-ray machine for horses to walk in. We had her sit up and hold her hands up. She was a movie star, you see. So she knew all sorts of things. If I went like this [Steve uses hand gestures], she would sit up. If I go like this, she would stand up. Like this, and she would sit down and roll over. Like this, and she would wave. She was an amazing, beautiful being.

We did an Earth Day celebration at the Concord Pavilion. It was a sold-out audience. Jane Goodall, David Brower and Baba Ram Dass were on the stage with Wavy Gravy, Chief Oren Lyons, the Onondaga Nations, and all these people. They had us come on with Susie Bear, the bald eagle and the wolf. At the end, I had this song by Cat Stevens, the one about merging with all of life, and I played it. Susie Bear stood up next to me, and we both waved to the audience.

People were crying. It was a beautiful, beautiful program. She really knew how to play an audience. She loved an audience. And she loved camerawork. She would literally run out of the enclosure and sit where she was supposed to sit because she did it for so many years with all the lights. She would sit there right in front of the cameras. All the producers would look at me and say, "How did that bear know how to do that?" I said, "Training." [Steve laughs] She was a star of Wilderness Family, Grizzly Adams and all sorts of different movies.

I have strangers come up to me and tell me that I let them meet Susie Bear and they

still have the picture. They tell me how much she changed their life. Just allowing them to be close to an animal like that, to have an experience with a wonderful being like that shifted the way they see life, forever.

So we had her in this X-ray machine and learned that the cancer was metastasizing and she didn't have long to live. So I spent all day with her, and then the following weeks and weeks. Finally we made the decision that it was time to put her to sleep, because she looked like she was in pain and starting to suffer. I always ask the animal when it's time. One night Michelle's daughter [Michelle is the head animal caregiver at Wildlife Associates], who I believe was five or six years old, woke up Michelle in the middle of the night and said, "Susie said goodbye, Mom. Susie came to me and said goodbye." And Michelle replied, "Susie's not going anywhere."

"No, Susie said goodbye and she is leaving us tomorrow. She came to me and said goodbye."

And I had a dream that same night that Susie Bear was dying. It was like the dream I had with the coyote. I saw where it happened and how it happened. The next day, we came with the veterinarian and we gave Susie Bear a shot to relax her a bit. And I put the leash on her and she walked out and lay down. I was not telling her where to go. She led me to the exact same spot I had in this vision. [Steve is crying]

With both of her paws, she grabbed my hand. She held onto it and looked me in the eyes and told me it was time to go. I tried to pull my hand away and she grabbed it, hard, and held it close to her. Then the doctor gave Susie Bear the shot, and she held on and looked me in the eyes until she left her body, and then her eyes closed. And she still held onto me for maybe twenty minutes, until it loosened up. I was so attached to her I didn't know how to let her go at the time. That part of me tore away and went with her. I couldn't talk about it for years and years. For months and months and months, I was a different person. Depressed. Something was missing; a hole was there.

Then Angeles Arrien, the cultural anthropologist, educator and founder of Cross-Cultural Education and Research asked me to teach a class for her adult students on "being with the animals." It was the first time I could talk about Susie Bear. Speaking of her, in terms of a teacher, and having her teach through me, became part of the healing process—being able to be, not the old Steve, but the Steve that evolved from that experience, so that I could move on. The animals were my primary focus. All of my love, all of my trust, all of my focus was on the animals. And the teaching is the way I express that to humanity.

By being in front of the kids, imparting this knowledge and awareness, the consciousness, and the nurturing, I saw the kids understanding more.

If kids don't understand that these wild animals are living, breathing beings with awareness and consciousness, different from our own, but similar in many ways, that we share the earth with, how are they going to help each other?

Humans come in many different clans, many different cultures, and people think, "If you don't talk or think the way I do, then there is something wrong with you." It's such a basic thing that can be shifted from gaining the understanding that these animals are our relatives, genetically speaking; plants are our relatives, genetically speaking.

Teaching

My teaching became more focused on an intuitive approach. These are highly designed educational programs we bring to the schools. What makes them so different is that we form relationships with the audience, and that connection allows us to lead students on a journey through the interrelationships in all of life. These kids have a very powerful experience as they discover, explore and feel it. Teaching is a process of being silent and letting your inner being guide the instructional experience. This place inside that's connected to the kids is what so effectively informs the learning process.

There are all these studies going on about how animals sense the world around them.

It's almost like they make choices. All this stuff is going on; everything is alive. And here we are, in the middle of everything that's alive. We rely on all those things around us, the biosphere, the Gaia, all this stuff keeping things going.

What's unusual with humans is we have the ability to have that conscious awareness of all that's going on, and we have the ability to destroy it. So there's this massive chasm, between being consciously aware of what's going on and not being aware at all. It's so easy to create stories in our head and to have any strange type of belief system. It's so easy for this brain to do that, because the brain doesn't understand. The brain tries to make sense of the world in any way it can.

So I have been lucky enough to have teachers like Susie. Can a bear be a mentor? Yes. Can a bear be a teacher? Yes. Can a bear be the love of your life? Yes. Can it be the barometer of experience on this planet? Who knows? But she still resides in my heart.

What are some of the lessons Susie passed on to me? Just to be who I am. That in my human relationships, I need to not expect anything, just to hook onto that internal experience of who a person is and communicate to that part of the person. When I was with Susie Bear, I wasn't trying to be someone else, because if I was, I'd have been hurt. If I was ever fooling myself, she would do something to awaken me. The wolf would do something to awaken me.

Last week I woke up. She was in my dream. I was talking to her in my dream and I talked so loud I woke myself up. I was literally talking out loud. I kept talking so I wouldn't slip out of it, so I could remember the conversation. So we still have conversations in sleep. [a silent pause]

I think she taught me how to be brave. It's like when I teach these young women who come to us from the Juvenile Detention Center, or the foster kids from the emergency shelters, or the at-risk teens. Being brave is not walking in and saying, "This is what I am going to teach." It's a process. We have a theme for the day, and the process begins with sitting down with them and working with them as individuals, on an inner level, so the program moves the way it should move.

It's working with human processes, the process of awareness and understanding that's in these kids. The whole point is to move them towards transformational experiences. You need to use your intuitive educational abilities to do this. You can't do this unless you are as open and as vulnerable as you want them to be. What makes these programs different is that we go deep with them. Again, we're not pushing them and prodding them, but orchestrating transformational experiences to occur. We bring them to the precipice, we bring them to the valley, to the place, and they walk across it. They make the connection and do it themselves; that's when learning happens; that's when transformational experiences occur. I can't do it for them, but I can lead them to it. They can watch me jump across the ravine, and they can do it too.

A Mission

And yes, I tested Susie Bear's love. Even at the time of her passing, after 13 years, I still did not believe it. I moved my hand away, and she grabbed it, pulled it back. So even then, I was thinking, our relationship can't be that strong, loving me so much, she can't be so conscious and aware that she is dying, she can't be wanting to hold onto me until her last breath before leaving her body because I was so important to her. I pulled back, and said, "Oh my God," and she pulled me into her embrace.

She was a babe. A little hairy [Steve laughs]. This big bear with these tiny little eyes; it was so hard to read them. The hardest thing to do was to read Susie Bear, at first. Then I had to stop doing it the way I do with the other animals. With most animals, you can look in their eyes and you can tell who they are. I had to look more at her body, her head posture, her body posture and her movement. I had to yell at her at times. We had our arguments [laughs]. But she knew how to be gentle to strangers. She had a mission in this life. She had a mission.