

MORE THAN A ZOO

Innovation is hallmark of the Southwick's story, in a milestone year



Southwick strong: David Brewer, Peter Brewer, DVM, Cindy Brewer-Lavoie, Justine Brewer, Betsey Brewer-Bethel and Robert Brewer.

By ROD LEE

The dawn of each new year brings with it still more reason to applaud all that has been accomplished at ever-improving Southwick's Zoo in Mendon.

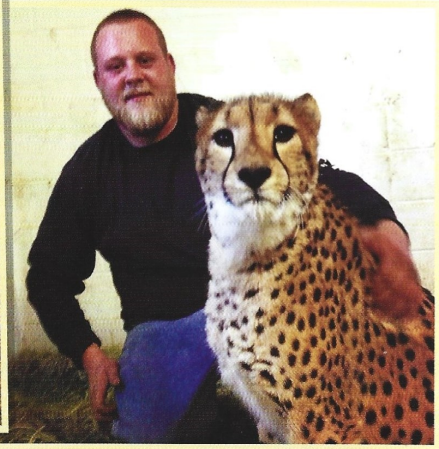
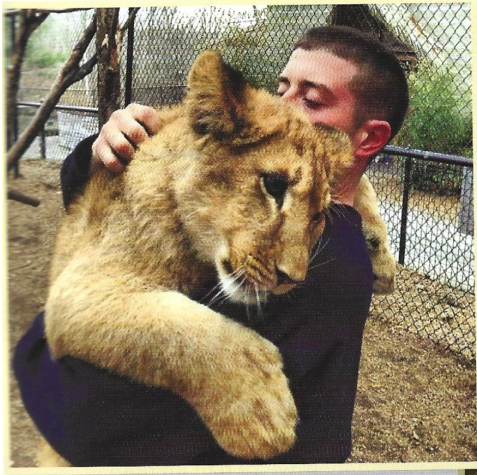
Among the highlights to look forward to in anticipation of opening weekend in early April are special happenings commemorating the zoo's 60th year of incorporation, incoming president Cindy Brewer-Lavoie and her mother, family matriarch Justine Brewer, said on February 20th during a conversation that took place in the upstairs board room of Galliford's Restaurant & Tavern.

"A big celebration" on Saturday, June 21st will officially mark the milestone. That event will focus on the history of the property from its early days as Justin F. Southwick's dairy and vegetable farm on through its reincarnation under his son Justin A. Southwick to aviculture and step by step into the largest wildlife refuge in New England; home now to more than nine hundred animals representing one hundred sixty different species from around the world.

Claflin Hill musicians will perform on June 21st. Smaller observances of the 60th will be offered in July and August. The public is invited to take in the fun and excitement.

Nestled on three hundred acres, Southwick's Zoo has been family owned and operated from the outset—and funded exclusively through admissions with no federal, state or local financial underpinning. It is one of the town of Mendon's most prized businesses, and a popular venue in the Blackstone Valley. Annual attendance runs in the thousands. The

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zoo has been key to the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce's efforts to promote patronage of the region's attractions—and tourism.

Ongoing changes and improvements to the zoo in recent years have demonstrated a commitment by the family to reinvention as a way to let the public know that Southwick's is about much more than its main draw—the animals.

Family at the forefront

Family has been at the helm from the beginning and this remains the case today. Ms. Brewer-Lavoie was elected president, effective January 1, 2025. She is taking over the position from her brother Dr. Peter Brewer. Cindy's sister Betsey Brewer-Bethel and their brothers Robert and David are still involved. Cindy's nephews Luke and Seth—Betsey's sons—represent still another generation contributing to the enterprise.

Peter Brewer was also the zoo's veterinarian. Since his decision to retire after succeeding his mom, Justine, as president eight years ago, veterinary care of the zoo's animals has been placed in the hands of Dr. Samantha King, a graduate of the Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University whose credentials include having worked with a traveling zoo's veterinary practice.

Dr. King joins Head Zookeeper Duane Long, Director of Operations Denise Lamoureux and Food & Beverage Director Nicholas Violette as important cogs in a business that employs approximately three hundred people when at full tilt.

As Galliford's head chef, Mr. Violette draws on extensive experience, which includes having been part of the restaurant scene in New port.

A seasoned culinary veteran, "he started as a dishwasher and worked his way up," Ms. Brewer-Lavoie said.

"Our workers grow with us," she said.

Formerly CFO of the zoo, Ms. Brewer-Lavoie is ideally suited to pick up the baton from her brother.

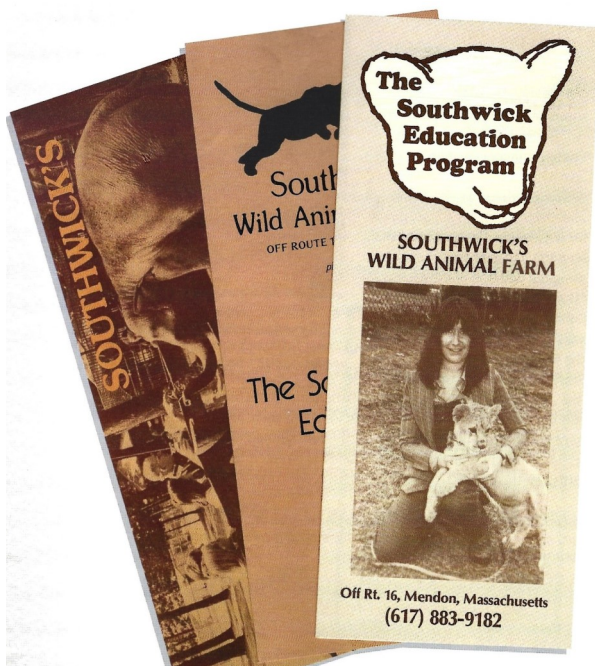
"I grew up working with my dad in the office," she said. She also

From *One Wild History*,
by John Galluzzo:

Betsey Brewer-Bethel's sons Luke and Seth are the newest generations of the Southwick-Brewer family working at the zoo.

Justin A. Southwick made the decision in the 1950s to sell the dairy herd and dedicate his life to exotic birds.

Left, from Robert Brewer's early public appearances grew a regular stream of outreach programs like those seen here."



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earned an Associate's degree in Business from Becker Junior College.

Upward bound in 2025

Ms. Brewer-Lavoie's familiarity with the many components that make Southwick's "more than a zoo"—for instance, the Woodland Express Train, the Soaring Eagle Zip Line, the Within the Wild Carousel, the Skyfari Sky Ride with a view of the African plains, the Purple Peacock gift shop, shows and keeper talks, field trips and bird presentations—is augmented by an eagerness to get the word out about freshly-added ingredients.

Among these are the EARTH Ltd. building under construction in close proximity to the zoo's grounds, from which Betsey Brewer-Bethel and her staff can talk conservation and education and research; a new group entrance; and the dismantling of the zoo's domed cages to gain, initially, a new gibbons' exhibit with a new view of the lion's lair. This work is being done "by my brothers, my nephew Luke and Rowland Gravel," Ms. Brewer-Lavoie said.

Rowland Gravel has worked in maintenance at Southwick's for many years and is a trusted hand.

Exuding positivity about what the new season has in store for the zoo's enthusiasts, Ms. Brewer-Lavoie pointed out a need to reorganize the total operation in order to piggyback on the spectacular growth that has taken place over the last eight years.

Galliford's Restaurant & Tavern has been a vital addition.

"Building this restaurant was one of the best things we ever did," she said.



With a dining feature to go with Halloween, Thanksgiving and Christmas-themed productions, and an assortment of other special events, the zoo's year has been expanded to virtually all twelve months.

Enter Galliford's

Galliford's opened its doors in 2017. Featuring American fare, a full bar, ample seating, live music, a patio area overlooking the zoo and an accommodating atmosphere for functions, the restaurant also means "not having to use our bank line of credit in the winter," Ms. Brewer-Lavoie said.

Galliford's is named for the late Robert Galliford, patriarch of the Brewer family and a guiding force in the zoo's growth.

"We planned Galliford's ten years before we started construction," Justine Brewer said.

Justine's connection to the zoo and to the nonprofit Daniels Farmstead in neighboring Blackstone—on her mother Clarice Daniels Southwick's side of the family—has been essential to the success of both ventures. Justine has carried on Clarice

Southwick Daniels's support of Daniels Farmstead.

"My mom was the only Daniels sibling to have children," Justine said. "She married Justin A. Southwick in 1934. I was their first born in 1936. Their second child was my sister Sandra and three years later my brother Daniel was born. So the three of us are Southwick's. My brother passed in 1977 and my sister in 2020."

Ties that bind

Daniels Farmstead is closely affiliated with Southwick's Zoo and the Southwick family legacy.

When Hiram T. Daniels's son Adin Thayer Daniels—"Charlie"—died in 1993, the farm was left to his eldest sister Doris Daniels King. In 2003, Doris turned over decision making to her niece, Justine.

Justine is co-founder and past president of the Daniels Farmstead Foundation.

Clafin Hill musicians will make an appearance not only at Southwick's Zoo in June but at Daniels Farmstead on July 6th for the farm's "Freedom Festival"—lots of history and fun," Justine said.

"Paul Revere," "Uncle Sam" and a fife and drum group will be present that day.

'One Wild History'

A remarkable and comprehensive account of Southwick's Zoo's evolution—*One Wild History*—was authored by John Galluzzo and



Galliford's Restaurant & Tavern has added a beneficial new dimension to the Southwick's Zoo experience, Cindy Brewer-Lavoie says. She is pictured with her mom, Justine Brewer.

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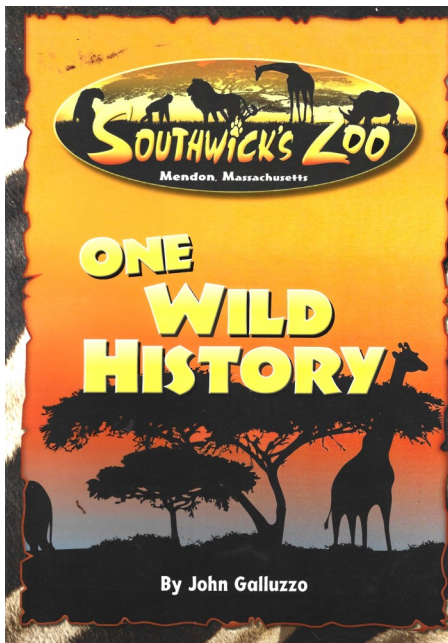
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published in 2016 by The Donning Company with a copyright held by Southwick's Zoo.

Consisting of six chapters and a post-script, the full-color booklet is a treasure trove of facts about the Southwick family, dating all the way back to Lawrence and Cassandra Southwick's arrival in Salem, Massachusetts in the 1630s.

Mr. Galluzzo describes Justin A. Southwick, son of the fancy poultry-loving Justin F. Southwick, as "the heart and soul of the zoo in its early days," with "the transition" to "a grander picture" that began in the late 1910s. Father and son's interest was not to become so-called "Knights of the Road" by traveling from show to show with boxcars full of exotic-looking birds, however. Their focus was on conservation of the species they raised as a way for generations of the family to continue what they had started.

"During the late 1950s," Mr. Galluzzo writes, "the Southwick family—Justin, Clarice and son Daniel, with daughter Justine and her husband Robert G. Brewer (and with Sandra raising her family in Connecticut)—began dealing with zoos and animal preserves all over the world." This led to a first exotic purchase, a guanaco, a member of the camel family from the dry mountainous area of South America.



Jeannie Hebert on a special family and place

'Southwick's Zoo has been an iconic treasure in the Blackstone Valley for 60 years, and it's no surprise. For six decades, the Southwick-Brewer family has not only nurtured a love for wildlife but has also created lasting memories for families of all ages. Under the stewardship of the Southwick-Brewer family, now in its fourth generation, the zoo has grown into a destination that celebrates both nature and family. From the stunning natural animal habitats to the thrilling gondolas and zip line, it offers something for everyone. The addition of Galliford's restaurant, where guests can enjoy exquisite meals while taking in the beauty of the exotic animals, elevates the experience. What truly makes Southwick's Zoo special, however, is the heart and soul behind it—Justine Southwick Brewer. As the matriarch of this remarkable family, Justine's kindness and generosity shine through in everything she does. She has always been an advocate for the zoo's mission, and it's an honor to work alongside such a wonderful individual. The zoo's legacy is a testament to the dedication, passion and vision of the Southwick-Brewer family.'

Ms. Hebert is president and CEO of the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce

By the 1960s and with Robert and Justine Brewer fully involved, the great adventure took shape. Robert Brewer designed and built the first iteration of Southwick's Wild Animal Farm. Two corporations were formed in 1965: Southwick Wild Animal Farm Inc. and Southwick Birds & Animals. Justin served as president of each business, while Daniel became vice president of Birds & Animals, which allowed the Southwicks to trade, sell or lease animals. Robert became vice president of the Wild Animal Farm.

In 1966, Mr. Galluzzo writes, "gate receipts showed at least 75,000 people had visited the Southwick Wild Animal Farm." The zoo now draws close to 500,000 visitors a year.

Rough times, and memories

There were challenges, and setbacks.

The Great Hurricane of 1938 ripped across New York's Long Island Sound, up into Rhode Island and Connecticut and then slammed eastern Massachusetts. It killed 682 people, caused \$306 million in damages and ravaged 57,000 homes, including the old Southwick homestead.

"It was a terrible, horrible surprise," Clarice Southwick said in 1985. "This house has forty windows and seven doors, and every pane of glass was cracked or broken."

Over the years, Southwick's Zoo has become a spectacle and a drawing card.

"Many famous people have bought animals at Southwick's," Clarice said

once. The Macy's of Macy's department store fame was one of them.

The late Robert F. Kennedy's son Robert Jr. (recently confirmed as U.S. secretary of health and human services) "bought several animals from us, and I can remember talking to his father on the phone," Clarice recalled.

The tales accompanying the zoo's latest milestone are as memorable as ones from James Herriot's *All Creatures Great and Small*.

Once, a zoo driver from West Haven, Connecticut stopped for a meal only to find upon leaving the restaurant that a 100-pound adult leopard has been stolen from his truck.

"Then there was the night in June of 1964 when William Atherton of 449 East Main Street in Milford awoke to find a five-month-old bear cub tearing up the upholstery of his car," Mr. Galluzzo writes. "The animal was a kidnapping victim from the farm. It spent the rest of the night in the Milford lockup."

Thus the saga of Southwick's Zoo marches on.

Observing The King of the Jungle, giraffes, chimps and reptiles and enjoying dinner or Sunday brunch at Galliford's will not be all that is happening at the zoo this year.

There will also be reflections on a 60th anniversary of the zoo's incorporation. ■