



Globe Magazine

THE BOSTON GLOBE ◆ APRIL 20, 2014

Massachusetts is poised to ban the shackling of prisoners during labor and delivery. It's part of a change in how we treat women

DOING TIME AND GIVING BIRTH.

BY MEREDITH DERBY BERG

 MARATHON PRAYER POWER // JIM BRAUDE: WHEN THE RADICAL CHOICE IS RIGHT // THE SCOOP ON LACROSSE

TWO RICK ROTHS WALK INTO A BAR...

HOW IS IT THAT THESE LOCAL GUYS SHARE THE SAME NAME AND SAME QUIRKY LINE OF WORK AND YET HAVE NEVER MET? WE WONDERED THAT, TOO — AND DECIDED TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT.

By **NICOLA CATALDO**

PHOTOGRAPH BY ESSDRAS M SUAREZ/GLOBE STAFF



Rick Roth, left, and Rick Roth, right; the Gloucester one holds a boa constrictor, the Littleton one, a coati.

RICK ROTH HAS MADE it his life's work to bring snakes and other critters to the people. Rick Roth has, too. So it didn't take long after they'd first met, at Laurie's 9:09 Gastro Diner, a Wakefield bar and restaurant, for the two nature educators to start talking shop.

"Have you ever been bitten in front of a crowd?" Rick Roth asked Rick Roth.

"Oh, sure," Rick Roth replied. "Last Wednesday, in front of a troop of Boy Scouts. Black racer got me, and it bled pretty good." And then there was the time an 8-foot python nailed

him in the neck. "But that snake went to the show anyway, so I figure I won that one."

A python also once got Rick Roth. "My big albino Burm—named Victor the Constrictor—bit me going into the cage at the end of a show. He latched right onto my thumb, and I couldn't get him off."

There are apparently 19 Richard Roths in Massachusetts. And as you might expect from two who share not just the same name but also the same line of work, the two Ricks have experienced years of confusion and strange coincidences, which they started to unravel as they sat down to a dinner that we set up one evening in late March.

Rick Roth is 61 and lives in Gloucester—let's call him Gloucester Rick. Founder and executive director of the nonprofit Cape Ann Vernal Pond Team (CAVPT), Gloucester Rick leads field trips each spring to witness mass migrations of salamanders and wood frogs to their breeding grounds in vernal pools. CAVPT (which counts me as a volunteer) offers one program on vernal pond ecology and another that features at least 20 species of snakes, including rattlesnakes, copperheads, and that black racer.

Rick Roth is 54, lives 55 miles from Gloucester in Littleton, and is the founder of Creature Teachers. His menagerie is made up of snakes, tropical birds, raccoons, tortoises, fisher cats, and tarantulas, among others. He spends about \$500 a month just to feed them all. Littleton Rick and his handful of employees did more than 400 shows around New England in 2013 at places like libraries and schools.

In time, the conversation at the table turned to cases of mistaken identity. About 12 or 13 years ago, Gloucester Rick said, he walked into a shop in Rockport and began to admire some wood carvings. "So I looked at the placard to see who did them. And there was my name." He said, "I'm a carver myself, but not at that level."

Littleton Rick was having weird experiences as well. Eight or nine years ago, he'd put on a show at an area library and soon after received a note from a relative with a newspaper clipping. He read through the first few paragraphs and nothing seemed amiss until he looked at the photo. *I don't have a water snake*, he thought. It turned out the story was about Gloucester Rick, who'd put on a show at the same library a week before Littleton Rick's visit.

Littleton Rick said there were other hints of a double over the next few years. "Like the time I left after a show at Belle Isle Marsh park and one of the park managers said, 'See you next

week.' I kind of panicked. I told her: 'Nobody booked us here for next week. We're all booked up elsewhere.' But they were adamant."

"Yeah, that was me," Gloucester Rick told him, explaining that he had been asked to work at Belle Isle. "I got your permit once," Gloucester Rick continued. "I got something in the mail from Fish & Wildlife. I opened the thing up and I said, 'Oh, alligator. I don't have an alligator.' But by then I knew who it was for."

The two Ricks compared backgrounds. Littleton Rick grew up in a wildlife family. His father was a director of education for Mass Audubon, and there had been all kinds of animals and birds in the house as far back as he could remember. He studied aquaculture in college and went on to be director of several small zoos and then curator of marine fishes for the Rainforest Cafe in Burlington. Eventually, he set out on his own.

Gloucester Rick, a carpenter by trade, said: "I caught my first snake—a northern brown—on the way home from kindergarten. I was just obsessed. And the only reason my mother let me keep snakes in the house was because she wasn't afraid of anything and they were quiet." He said CAVPT, which has certified more than 100 vernal ponds on Cape Ann, was launched 24 years ago, when he and three friends wanted to see salamanders migrate and breed. "You can go your whole life never seeing a spotted salamander, never knowing there may be hundreds of these critters right in your backyard," he says. He'd like to establish a nature study center in the Cape Ann area, which would include field trips to see animals year-round.

Over burgers and mugs of beer, the Ricks discussed veterinary bills and the rigorous process of acquiring a Fisheries & Wildlife permit to keep potentially dangerous animals. They compared notes on how to manage a crowd of excited children while simultaneously managing a wild animal—like Victor, the python that latched onto Littleton Rick's thumb.

"I heard somewhere that they will let go if you bend their tail, so I had my

helper try that, but that just made him bite down harder," Littleton Rick said. "Then I tried putting tepid water on his tail. That made him bite down harder still." He just had to wait until Victor let go.

"But even that's educational," Gloucester Rick said. "When something like that happens, I just tell the kids, 'If you go around picking up wild snakes, this is what's likely to happen.'"

Littleton Rick said: "My goal is to get kids to appreciate that every single animal is valuable. But

what I see happening today is kids are so overwhelmed with all the negative. All they hear is extinction, extinction, extinction, and they start to feel there's no hope. They just give up."

"I'm not saying it's not our fault, because it is," he continued, "but I would rather they see that there is something you can do, that you can get involved and maybe change some things."

Two and a half hours later, it was time to go. They shook hands and put on their jackets. "You know," Gloucester Rick had said, "I was kind of nervous about finally meeting you. . . . We are competitors in a way. And then again, we're not, because we're both working toward the same goals." Before they were strangers, now they were friends.

As they left, Rick Roth invited Rick Roth over to check out his animals sometime. ■

Nicola Cataldo is a freelance writer and conservation commissioner in Framingham. Send comments to magazine@globe.com.