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THE CANUNGRA ANIMAL WHISPERER BRINGING RED DOG BACK TO THE BIG SCREEN

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WITH THE CAT OUT OF THE BAG ON THE LATEST RED DOG FILM, WE CATCH UP WITH THE CANUNGRA WOMAN WHOSE MAGICAL GIFT TURNS ANIMALS INTO MOVIE STARS

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It's hardly surprising Zelie Bullen calls from a movie set; what is surprising is that she is sans animals on this one. Don't be fooled by the title — Zelie is not required to wrangle any bunnies for *Peter Rabbit 2*.

They've called her up to be a stuntwoman, a gig she used to do in a past life but apparently can still pull off.

"It's like riding a bike," she says. "They just needed a few old girls. It's been good fun."

Zelie knows her way around film sets. She's regarded as one of the best movie animal trainers in the business. Just ask Stephen Spielberg.

Think of an animal movie you've seen the past two decades or so and there's a fair chance Zelie was there off camera putting her charges through their paces.

The horses in *War Horse*, the farmyard animals in *Charlotte's Web*, the zebra in *Racing Stripes*, the pelicans in *Storm Boy*, Zelie is no one species wonder.

And as an industry pro, she knows not to talk about what she's been working on until the time is right.

Now word is out that another *Red Dog* film is due to be released by the end of the year, she's happy to confirm she was in Western Australia last year to make sure the star of the show gave his best performance.

Koko: A Red Dog Story will be the third *Red Dog* film by producer Nelson Woss.

Zelie was delighted to find she was working with much the same crew as she did on the previous film *Red Dog: True Blue*, released in 2016.

This film though will be a little different. It tells the real story of Koko, the Australian kelpie who starred in the original *Red Dog* film, a modest budget project that went on to become the eighth highest grossing Australian film of all time.

The charismatic Koko belonged to Woss and died in 2012, aged seven, of congenital heart disease. His death was widely reported across the country.

Zelie worked with two Australian kelpies on the latest project — Dodge who plays the older Koko and Hero who plays him as a younger dog.

Her family — husband Craig, children Colt, 12, and Blaze, 3, and their five dogs — travelled to the west for the shoot and are now back at their Gold Coast hinterland home before embarking on their next big secret project for 2019.

"Ooh, I can't say too much about that one except I'm looking forward to it," she laughs.

Zelie rose to prominence after she was hand-picked to work on the acclaimed Spielberg film *War Horse* shot in England and released in 2011.

She later featured on an *Australian Story* episode that laid bare her life story: the youngest of three daughters raised by a single mother on the outskirts of Perth who had an uncanny affinity with animals.

She grew up close to her middle sister, Julie, who

was killed in a car accident at 19. At the funeral, the absent father Julie was trying to forge a relationship with whispered to Zelie he was sorry he had missed out on their lives. Zelie honoured Julie's wish to reconnect with him and, just as that bridge was building, he died of lung cancer.

It was an ad on TV for the newly-opened Warner Brothers Movieworld that drew Zelie to Queensland. It featured a rearing palomino horse and she wanted to learn from the person who trained it to do that.

She took up stunt work as well and fell in love with a fellow stunt performer who tragically died after falling from the railing of a friend's high-rise apartment after a night out.

The third death in four years of someone close to Zelie broke her.

"I didn't want to be here," she says. "It was a very real sadness. Mum was trying not to have me medicated so I was on a 24-hour watch with family and friends. I was scared of what I would find after life, but it wasn't enough to stop me. What it would do to other people didn't impact on me. I thought, 'Mum will understand enough's enough'. Then one day I thought how my mum would feel burying a second daughter. When I realised that, that was the stage in the grieving process when I thought there's a future."

But it was a different Zelie who emerged on the other side.

"I was done with planning. You couldn't trust anything. Anything can be taken off you. I realised you don't live for the future, you live for now. I just started feeling everything at a greater level than before."

One of those things was her connection with animals. To watch Zelie at work is to marvel at her almost mystical communication with them.

"I can't put it into words," she says. "It's a feeling. The more love and trust you put into an animal, the more safe and confident they feel on the set. When they're comfortable and happy, they enjoy it and it comes out in the film."

Perhaps Stephen Spielberg said it best. After shooting for *War Horse* wrapped, he threw his arms



around her.

"He said to me, 'All the love you put into your animals has come out on my screen and it will be there forever'. It almost brought me to tears to hear that from someone like him. It was such an honour.

"But it's the truth. It's the trust and the bond, an almost magical connection."

It begs the question what Zelie makes of the animal rights movement, recently capturing national media attention by disrupting performances at Sea World and Outback Spectacular.

"It's become quite bizarre with the rise of social media," she says. "I understand the concerns about animal welfare and capturing creatures from the wild, but our animals come from breeding programs here; they're not captured.

"It's a dangerous thing to make judgements on things you don't know very much about. Everyone's evolved. No one wants to see animals suffering.



"I think they (animal rights protesters) are mostly compassionate and well-meaning people steered up the wrong path by extremists and it's a shame all that energy couldn't go to help the animals worldwide that really need it."

On their Canungra property, Zelig and Craig keep a much-loved menagerie including some "exotics": lions, tigers, baboons. Some of the bloodlines go back to when Craig's family ran Bullen's Lion Safari Park at Yatala from 1969 to 1988, when people could drive their own cars through the compound to see free-roaming African wildlife.

"But let me tell you the animal that's the most treasured at our house at the moment is Spot, my daughter's guinea pig," Zelig laughs.

At three, Zelig describes the aptly named Blaze as a firecracker, born ready to take on the world.

Zelig gave birth to her at 45, a miracle child she somehow always sensed was coming.

"It was the strangest thing," Zelig says.

"Even when Colt was two and I'd be strapping him in his car seat, I'd turn around and look for the other one. We talked about having another baby but there was always the next job and we never really made a decision."

After two heart-wrenching miscarriages, Zelig fell pregnant and knew straight away it was a girl.

"I was excited and crying," she says. "I said to Craig, 'What if we lose this one too?' He said, 'I'm pretty sure we won't'. When she was born, I just knew we were

waiting for her and she was waiting for us."

What's amazed Zelig is the completely different parenting experience she has had the second time around.

"Colt is a gentle and kind soul, but Blaze is the boss of the house — a very different character and so much fun," she says. "I felt like I had to protect Colt from other people and I feel like I have to protect other people from Blaze."

Zelig has come a long way from the young woman who vowed never to have children because she couldn't live with the fear of losing them.

In fact, many things have changed in Zelig's life, even since the release of her autobiography *Love, Sweat and Tears* in 2013.

She'd rejected many publishers' offers to tell her story in book form until one day the respected Australian publishing figure Richard Walsh from Allen & Unwin found her soft underbelly.

"I'd told him about a man who contacted me after that *Australian Story*," she says. "It was in the days my phone number was still on our website."

"He told me how he'd lost his wife and three children in a car accident. He'd been depressed and couldn't pick himself up. He couldn't work, had no job. He had no desire for anything."

Her voice quavers. Even now it touches her.

"He said, 'I just wanted to thank you. After seeing your story, I'm starting to feel things I haven't felt in a long time'."

"I was shell shocked and emotional. I hung up the phone from him and I didn't even get his number."

"Richard Walsh said, 'How many other people would love to hear that story? You can help people. You can be inspirational'. That's probably what got me. I love helping people."

The book was written with her oldest sister Freda and was in the top 10 selling biographies in Australia that year.

"More things have happened since then," she says. "Maybe there could be another book one day."

But it seems Zelig might need to be a bit careful about saying such things, given her track record for her thoughts materialising in her life.

"I never claimed to know how it works," she says. "But I absolutely believe you get what you put your energy into. Even with our next big job, I thought I'd love to play with kids and ponies, these animals in this location and at this time of the year. The next thing, it's happened."

"And just the other day I thought it was interesting we didn't get a call for a particular job and someone else did. The very next day they rang and said, 'It's not really working out. Can you do it for us?'"

"You have to feel the sensation. I say to my son, you'll get what you think about so think about what you want, not how you're getting there. That will all just work out."

Sage advice from the animal whisperer. It has indeed all worked out for her.