

REPTILE RETAILER

SPOTLIGHT

by Eric Syverson

Pets To Go

Elk Grove, California

Jeremy and Angel Epstein have somewhat of a split identity. The name these business owners go by largely depends on where their customers prefer to do their shopping. Those visiting reptile expos or hunting for reptiles on the Web might know the couple as Upscale Reptiles. Most entering their store in Elk Grove, Calif., know them by a different name: Pets To Go.

Don't worry; the Epsteins answer to either name no matter where their customers find them. They kept the names separate because they knew what name recognition could do for a young enterprising couple, and it appears to be working. Their expos grow every year, and four employees help them at the store.

Angel's 1992 birthday present, a pair of corn snakes, started them down this path. Soon both had become avid reptile hobbyists. Jeremy said they attended as many as 15 shows per year, and inevitably their collection grew.

By 1995 they were building furniture cabinets to hold all the cages, and Jeremy realized they had reached a pivotal point. "It was like, you know, what are we doing?" he said. "We really enjoy this. Is this going to become a business, or is this going to stay a hobby?" Their hobby had become too expensive. A business it would be.

The Epsteins began breeding snakes and lizards in earnest under the name Upscale Reptiles. Then the avid expo-goers promoted the first show of their own in 1998. Jeremy said the 1,200-square-foot expo, The Sacramento Reptile Show, drew 500 people, and the two "lost their butts."

But they persisted and took a risk, and today the couple promotes the Sacramento show, which Jeremy said occupies more than 70,000 square feet and draws more than 10,000 people, and a sister show in

San Jose, Calif.


In 1999, the Epsteins bought Pets To Go, giving them a new name and an outlet to sell their baby reptiles. But that's not all they sell. Jeremy said though Sacramento's reptile market is growing, it's smaller than others, so Pets To Go's top selling category is dog food and supplies. Reptiles are a strong second.

"The running joke in the store is that dog food supplies the hobby of reptiles," Jeremy said. "It supplements our ability to do the reptiles the way we want to do them."

The store has specific standards on that front. The Epsteins produce many of the reptiles sold, they talk with local herp veterinarians, and they don't sell species regularly abandoned at local shelters, such as green iguanas or snakes longer than 15 feet.

There's also a strong focus on educating customers on the proper care of reptiles. Pets To Go has care sheets and books like most stores, Jeremy said, but it's the staff that makes the difference. "The staff knows how to sell an animal based on what its needs are," he said. "They're not on the floor unless they're talking to people the right way."

Saying they are "true believers" in education, the duo known by two names see the benefits of this philosophy extend far beyond their store or their shows, especially when the customers are young.

"If you make people advocates at a young age, they stay advocates forever," Jeremy said. "You get them hooked smart. They love you forever, they keep coming back, and they further the hobby. You've got to further the hobby." 



Jeremy and Angel Epstein and their son, Saul, show off a few store reptiles. The Epsteins bought Pets To Go in 1999. When Saul was a baby, the couple converted the office into a nursery.

DRIVE HERE:

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