

Barre family lives dream as hosts of reptile show



By Amanda Roberge Correspondent

It's a family affair for New England Reptile Shows, featuring the Ericksons: a family that consists of four humans and their 55 closest friends.

The traveling reptile show, the only one of its kind in the Bay State, has been hosted at birthday parties, summer camps, town fairs and anywhere else there are lots of kids. And to think that it all started in Emily Erickson's backyard in Worcester.

The Quabbin High School graduate has had an affinity for not only reptiles themselves, but also for showing them off in an educational and entertainment capacity, since she was 8.

When she was just a regular kid with a few exotic creatures for pets, she could frequently be found putting on spontaneous shows in her yard, which led her to

start out as Emily's Backyard Creatures, through which she started gigging and offering a few shows a year by the time she was a junior.

Since Emily and her mom, Jodi, lived in Worcester with a friend of Jodi's who didn't care much for the creatures, it was difficult to grow - but Jodi continued to support her daughter's dream the best she could given the circumstances.

"Ever since she was a little, little kid, this is what she wanted to do," she said. Emily's early mentor was "The Creature Teacher" Richard Roth, whom she once saw perform at school and who knew in that moment where she was headed.

But in a strange and wonderful twist of events, Jodi and her husband, Eric, reunited and the family - including Joshua, who has special needs and has lived in a care facility up until now - is living happily under one roof in Barre. It's a charming and happy life - just mom, dad, son and daughter, plus a growing extended family of spiders, snakes, geckos, turtles, lizards and iguanas.



"We are finally doing what we love," said Mrs. Erickson. "We are living the dream."

Their new endeavor, New England Reptile Shows, has in the past two years performed more than 100 shows. With mom Jodi the "clown" of the group," and Emily the voice of activism and education, the family has developed a few shticks that keep audiences engaged and kids learning.

With a gentle sensitivity to special needs kids, the family is also focused on making all of their shows inclusive, engaging and full of acceptance. Joshua is on hand whenever he can make it to interact with audiences and help them to connect with the creatures.

"We thought with the colder weather that business would slow down," said Emily, "but we are still busy and booking into April."

The show, which is tailored to whatever demographic or age group it is that they have been hired to entertain and educate, consists of about one hour or "show and tell," and another 45 to 60 minutes of holding time and photo shoots. After all, selfies are cool, but selfies with snakes are infinitely cooler.

From a couple of hairy tarantulas to a 10-foot python named Irwin, the creatures in the Ericksons' show might begin to break down any walls you have that keep you from loving reptiles. The Ericksons are making it their mission.

"If you do what you love, you never work a day in your life," said Jodi. "We love what we do."

For more information, visit newenglandreptileshows.com.