



from the **Archives**

The year of the cat

Alumni share the story of RIT's legendary tiger

In 1963-1964, a Bengal tiger prowled the halls of RIT.

In his short life, that cat had a profound influence on the institute and on the students who cared for him.

Four decades later, five members of the original tiger committee got together to tell the story. David Page '66 (photo science), Jim Black '64 (chemistry), Denis Kitchen '65 (printing), Roger Kramer '65 (photo science), and Francis "Skip" Millor '65 (photo science) gathered in the Archives and Special Collections area of Wallace Library for a video-taped interview.

The tale begins in the RITskeller on RIT's old downtown Rochester campus. Someone – no one remembers who – suggested that RIT should have a real tiger.

"The idea just emerged from the grease of the hamburgers of the RITskeller," says Kramer. "We really thought we needed a tiger, and we saw no reason why we shouldn't get one."

The students took their idea to A. Stephen Walls, director of student activities. Instead of laughing them out of his office, Walls contacted Louis DiSabato, director of Rochester's Seneca Park Zoo. The zoo official said only licensed facilities could buy a tiger. Undeterred, the students asked DiSabato if the zoo would arrange for the purchase and house the tiger, providing the students raised the money.

He agreed. The wild idea was becoming reality.

"The cost was going to be \$1,000," says Kitchen. "That was back in the time when \$1,000 was a lot of money. So we came up with the idea of raising money by selling stock. We sold shares for \$1 a piece, and we sold enough to raise \$1,000."

Hold that tiger

The tiger's arrival on Oct. 30, 1963, was a major event. About 50 students, including RIT officials and the cheerleading squad, formed a motorcade to travel to the airport for the first view of the 8-week-old cub born at the Dallas Zoo.

"The cage was covered in burlap," says Kramer, "and all we heard was this sort of deep, well, it was a purr, but you knew there was a very large cat there.

"They opened up one edge and this paw came out that

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Members of the original tiger committee met for a video-recorded interview in the Archives and Special Collections area of Wallace Library. From left are Francis "Skip" Millor, Roger Kramer, David Page, Denis Kitchen and James Black. Photo by Ken Huth '88.

40 years later, they're still grrr-eat tiger fans

James Black '64 (chemistry) studied personnel administration in graduate school at Syracuse University. He served as director of the men's housing at RIT, worked at Rochester Business Institute, and then joined the personnel department at McCurdy's department stores, where he worked for 10 years. For the past 23 years, he has worked for Monroe County as a supervising examiner for public assistance and Medicaid. He has been a board member and volunteer case manager for AIDS Rochester and was president of Helping People with AIDS.

Denis Kitchen '65 (printing) received a master's degree in student personnel administration at Indiana University before becoming a Navy pilot. He received his law degree from the University of Buffalo and has been a lawyer for 30 years.

David Page '66 (photo science) joined Polaroid Corp. as supervisor of quality control for Polaroid Copy Service Division, then designed recognition systems during the Vietnam War. He joined the radiology department at Duke University, eventually becoming fine arts photographer. He retired about five years ago after 30 years with the university. He lives in North Carolina.

Roger Kramer '65 (photo science) worked in New York City designing photographic laboratory equipment for Calumet for a year, then enlisted in the Air Force and was involved in combat documentation and in aerial intelligence. He retired as a colonel, then went back to the University of Texas San Antonio and earned a master's in history, and a B.A. in history teaching and coaching. He worked as a science teacher, school principal and district administrator before retiring. He now teaches at a private school in Texas.

Francis "Skip" Millor '65 (photo science) received a master's in education from Syracuse University and taught for several years before joining the Army. After leaving the military, he went to work for Kodak in the motion picture division in sales and marketing. He retired after 30 years and started his own business providing management coaching, sales training and other services to small businesses.

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was about the size of my head,” Kramer continues. “And Lou DiSabato said, ‘Oh, he’s going to be a big one.’ But then what followed was this little tiger.”

The RIT tiger lived at the zoo, but student handlers were allowed to visit the cub when the zoo was closed, and to take the cat to campus and community events. Most of the handlers were members of Alpha Phi Omega, a national service fraternity.



A. Stephen Walls,
former director of
student activities

King of the campus

“The students really jumped on the idea that we had our own frosh-eating tiger,” says Page. “Just as today, there was a lot of talk about apathy on campus. Denis wrote a letter to the editor about how the cat had been the best thing to end student apathy.”

“RIT was a unique experience, to come to an urban campus,” says Kitchen. “It was so intimate. There were only 2,500 people in the day school, and there were 6,500 in the night school.

“We were fighting apathy at the time,” Kitchen continues. “I think the tiger was the king of the whole fight against apathy.”

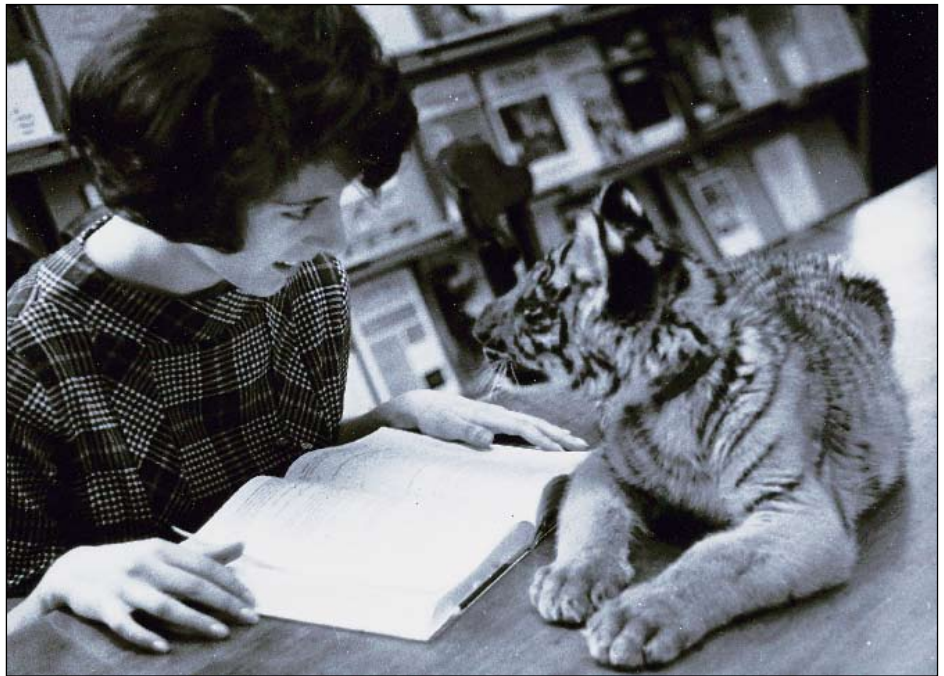
“At that point,” adds Black, “that’s when they made the announcement of the new campus. So a lot of stuff was happening, and the tiger was one part of it, and it brought a lot of it together, I think.”

Spirit, as the tiger was called, was popular with local media as well as with students. One TV appearance was especially memorable.

“We’d given him a sneaker to play with,” says Black. “And he’s on this kids’ show, and this guy has sneakers on. And there are kids in the audience. The tiger decides that he wants to eat the sneakers. He’s biting this guy’s foot on television. They finally took a break so we could get the tiger off this guy’s foot.”

Despite this and other stories of typical feline behavior, all agree that Spirit was a very gentle animal. “He loved people,” says Page. “I don’t think he ever hurt anyone on purpose. As handlers, the main thing we had to do was protect the cat from over-zealous people.”

Eventually, however, there came a day



The name Spirit – for Student Pride in RIT – was chosen through a ‘name the tiger’ contest.

Go, Brownie?

RIT’s teams have been called the Techmen and the Blue-Gray. A dog named Brownie was mascot in the post-World War I era.

The undefeated 1955 basketball team inspired a moniker that depicted the team’s ferocious spirit. Henry Watts, head of the RIT News Bureau, began sending out news releases using “Tigers” as the nickname.

The name stuck, and the tiger has represented RIT for half a century.

when Spirit was barred from campus.

“The ultimate thing was,” says Kramer, “a couple of reps from the school’s insurance company showed up, and they wanted to see this tiger. And I’m sure that the guys we were talking to were lawyers, because the cat immediately tore up one guy’s pant leg – not the guy, just his pants.

“And that guy turned around and said ‘One day, tiger’s gone or you don’t have any insurance.’ And that was the last time he was on campus.”

The day the magic died

From the day of his arrival to the day he was banned, about four months had passed. After that, the students continued

to visit Spirit at the zoo, walking and playing with him until he was well over 100 pounds. But even those visits soon came to an end.

Early on, the tiger had been given calcium to correct a deficiency. When his bones hardened, a much more serious problem developed: A pelvic constriction that prevented the elimination of wastes. It was an incurable genetic defect.

The zoo called to tell the students that the end was near. Page still chokes up when he remembers that day: Sept. 28, 1964.

“To crawl out into that cage with him, and play with him, and know that when we left they were going to put him down – it was profoundly sad.”

The tiger committee members graduated. RIT moved to a new campus and began the evolution into a much larger, more complex university. None of the five alumni believe that it would be possible – or advisable – to bring a live tiger mascot to RIT today.

“I got thinking about this,” says Page. “You know there’s a song about Puff, the Magic Dragon? We were all going to go away. Everyone. And he would have been left alone. So, getting philosophic, it’s sort of like our Marilyn Monroe. He died young, good-looking kid.”

And the memories of Spirit, the magic tiger, live on.

Kathy Lindsley

To learn more about RIT’s tiger, visit the Web at wally.rit.edu/depts/archives/Tigerpage.htm.