

# Jack Hanna's Columbus

**Local life—human and animal alike—  
populates this world-famous zoo  
director's Ohio city of dreams.**

**After Jack Hanna** left Muskingum College in 1969, he had no plans to return to Ohio.

"If you ever told me I'd be back to Ohio, I'd have told you you're crazy," the Tennessee native said. At that time, he said, Columbus was revered as a "cow town."

But it was—and still is—also the home of the Nationwide Children's Hospital, which brought Hanna back to Ohio after all. He returned in 1978 seeking treatment for his daughter, who was suffering from cancer.

Everything changed when he found out the Columbus Zoo was looking for a new director.

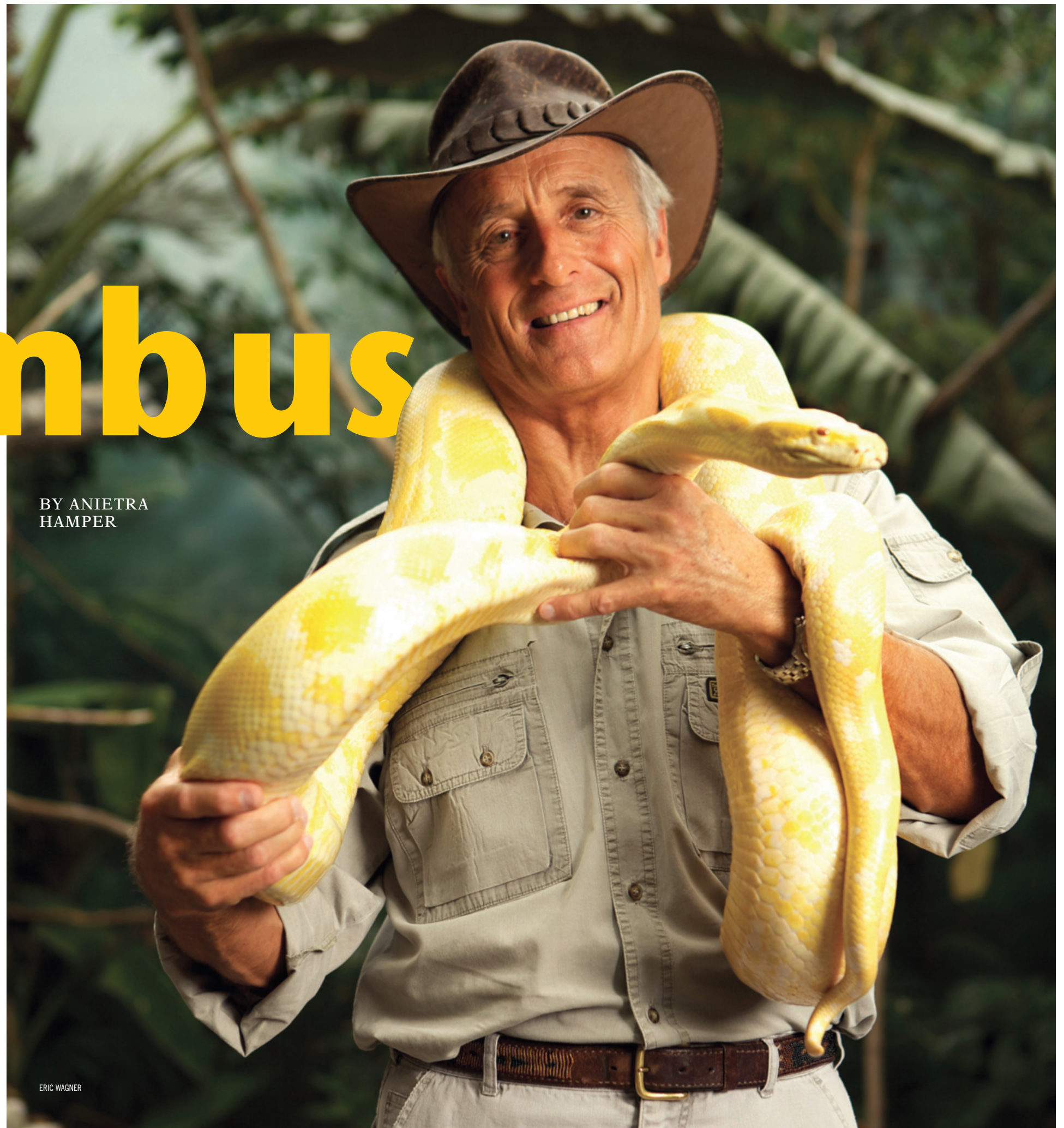
As a kid, Hanna had dreamed of becoming a zookeeper. He lived vicariously through episodes of *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*. He spent the summers of his early teens working at a veterinar-

ian's office in Knoxville, Tenn., where he opened a pet shop with his wife after graduating college. But the zoo called to him—even if neither the airplane pilot nor the cab driver who would eventually escort him to the Columbus Zoo knew it existed.

"We flew over and saw this little ol' teeny thing," Hanna said. "I said 'I think that's it down there—I can't tell.' When we landed, I got in the cab and said, 'I need to go to the Columbus Zoo.' The guy goes, 'We don't have a zoo in Columbus.'"

Now, the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium is the number-one zoo in the U.S. Hanna, the director emeritus, makes appearances worldwide. He's hosted five TV shows of his own, including the popular *Jack Hanna's Into the Wild*. He travels more than 260 days a year and has homes in Montana and Rwanda. But his true home?

BY ANIETRA  
HAMPER



ERIC WAGNER



"I couldn't put the worth that Columbus, Ohio, has meant to our family (into words)," Hanna said. "It's given us a daughter; it's given me a job that I dreamed about; it's given me the opportunity to bring the animal world to tens of millions of people over the last few years."

"Never in a million years would I have ever dreamed of traveling out of the state of Tennessee, much less traveling the world, and here I have lived two dreams. It's been my life's work—a big dream."

## Ohio Kingdom

To Hanna, the little dot of land sitting alongside the Scioto River was a gold mine of opportunity. Hanna had a vision to put the zoo—and the city of Columbus—on the map.

"I got the community excited, saying we had a lot of opportunities here," he said. "Then we started painting the buildings and doing some crazy things."

Those crazy things included staging a tightrope stunt over the zoo's tiger exhibit and serving concessions to the general public out of the animals' food-prep room. These stunts were the genesis of behavior that's now Hanna's signature—drawing attention to a cause. He was determined to attract crowds to the emerging zoo; they came, and so did new jobs and funds for expansion.

Today, Hanna laughs and shakes his head at the lengths he went to for the zoo. (He also assures the public that concessions are health-department-approved and made in a designated people-food prep area.)

This year, the zoo expects to see 2.4 million visitors.

"The development of the Columbus Zoo in the last 32 years since I've been here is almost like the development that has happened in the city of Columbus," Hanna said.

Hanna remembers a time when downtown Columbus had little to do. Now, the heart of the city is a hub for activities of all kinds—arts, entertainment, dining, sporting events. Performances grace stages at the Ohio Theatre and Palace Theatre. Exotic plants, art and special events fill the Franklin Park Conservatory. The family-friendly Columbus Museum of Art just underwent a multimillion-dollar expansion to immerse visitors in the art world.



BETH ERVING/EXPERIENCE COLUMBUS



COSI



LINDA LICKTEIG

Clockwise from left: Science exhibits spark imaginations at COSI; the Columbus Clippers take on the Louisville Cardinals at Huntington Park; the 47-story, Art Deco Leveque Tower crowns the Columbus skyline along the Scioto River; the striking Ohio Stadium has been home to the OSU Buckeyes' games since 1922; the popular German Village's The Book Loft, featuring 32 rooms, is only one place to explore.

Hanna is a big fan of Columbus' Center of Science and Industry, a sprawling venue for kids and families open every day of the year. Once a three-story building on Broad Street, COSI now resides in a 320,000-square-foot building in downtown Columbus. Named the number-one science center in the country by Parents magazine for its interactive state-of-the-art exhibits, COSI focuses on early childhood development, health and medicine, and energy and the environment.

Down the street, crowds root for the Columbus Clippers minor league baseball team at the new Huntington Park. The 2010 Triple-A National Champions' games pack thousands into the stands for summer evenings complete with dime-a-dog nights and featured concerts. The National Hockey League's Columbus Bluejackets make their home in the Arena District. Major League Soccer's Columbus Crew draws a sea of black-and-gold loyalists to Crew Stadium from mid-March through mid-October. And when fall rolls into central Ohio, visitors can't help but notice the scarlet-and-gray-clad OSU fans cheering on the Buckeyes.

## On the Edge

Districts on the fringe of Columbus' downtown have their own distinct cultures. One of Hanna's favorites is the Short North Arts District, where Hanna, a self-proclaimed people watcher, enjoys the human spectacle as much as the galleries.

On the first Saturday of every month, the sidewalks along High Street are packed for the Short North Gallery Hop. Eateries such as Haiku Poetic Food & Art give patrons a front-row seat to watch sushi chefs create edible works of art; pencils and paper alongside condiments allow customers to write their own poetry. At Jeni's Splendid

Ice Creams, the line is typically out the door—plenty stop in for Wildberry Lavender, Bangkok Peanut and other inventive flavors.

Hanna also enjoys the quaint feel and brick-paved streets of German Village, settled in the 1800s. Over time, life developed around the rustic neighborhood; today, locally owned establishments such as Katzinger's Delicatessen, which serves up to 2 tons of corned beef and 98 barrels of pickles a month, are favorite stops for hungry locals and out of towners. Appetites also lead the famished to Schmidt's Sausage Haus and the Thurman Cafe, home of the massive Thurman Burger.

## Environmental Awareness

Hanna sees big things in the future—including visitor accommodations at the zoo. Expansion plans include lodges on the zoo's 600-acre grounds, which already feature a golf course and a waterpark at Zoombezi Bay; soon, construction of a new African exhibit will begin.

"Dad wants to play golf—there's an 18-hole golf course. The kids want to go to the waterpark—there's one of the finest waterparks in the country. It's brand new," Hanna said. "They want to go to the zoo. You're talking a Friday, Saturday, Sunday. Every day, you can do something different."

It's the going idea in Columbus. Developers are looking to bring new life to the downtown riverfront with restaurants and attractions. A new casino is slated to open in 2012.

Hanna encourages everyone to explore places he or she never thought to visit. He hopes Columbus will top that list.

"The people are friendly here," he said. "Pricing is efficient here. You can't beat the pricing here for hotels and food. Right now, during these times, Columbus, Ohio, should be number one on the list to go to."

Hanna has been to nearly every country in the world—but he chooses Columbus.

"I live here because it's my home," he said. "Every single appearance I do, it is always Columbus Zoo, Columbus, Ohio. I don't promote anything. The only way I want to be introduced is Jack Hanna, director emeritus, Columbus Zoo, Columbus, Ohio."

## Planning Your Trip

For trip-planning assistance, contact a local AAA Travel agent or visit [AAA.com/travel](http://AAA.com/travel). Be sure to ask about AAA's discounted Columbus Zoo and Aquarium admission.

H&A

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