On a bright spring morning in northeast Pennsylvania, it’s time to move Duncan and Nugget, two 1,000-pound pigs, into their new home.

For Indra Lahiri (B.A. 1991), that means rising early — before the fog lifts from the surrounding hills — and setting up temporary fencing to guide Duncan and Nugget from the barn to the structure. Although this day has been in the works since last summer, she’s uncertain how the move will go. The pigs might follow the makeshift path or they might trample the fence and go in another direction.

“There’s an element of the unknown when you deal with 1,000-pound animals,” explains Lahiri, a petite woman with boundless energy.

Once the fencing is secure, Lahiri and a couple of volunteers lure the pigs from the barn to their new home with food.

“Breakfast!” Lahiri exclaims as she shakes a container of feed. The pigs dutifully trot behind her, never wavering from the path. The move goes flawlessly, taking less than 30 seconds. But perhaps that isn’t surprising since those who work at Indraloka Animal Sanctuary know Lahiri feels a connection with the animals.

Nestled in the hills of Pennsylvania, Indraloka Animal Sanctuary is a place where animals find refuge. It’s also a place that brought together two CUA alumnae for the sake of two very large pigs.

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Kate O'Connor and Indra Lahiri.

“Peace, Love, and Animals”

Opened in 2005, Indraloka sits on 30 acres in Middletown, Pa. Lahiri, whose father was born in India, named it for the Sanskrit word meaning “heaven for the gods.” She founded the sanctuary on the principles that the earth and all life are sacred, and that all living beings are related. More than 150 animals live on the property, including cows, dogs, cats, chickens, ducks, geese, goats, pigs, horses, sheep, mules, and even a peacock.

Lahiri’s history with animals began when she was a baby. The family had a boxer named Panda. “My parents noticed I never cried,” she explains. “They realized that the dog was taking care of everything I needed. She would get my mom’s attention when my diaper needed changing or I was hungry, even before I got ready to cry.” From the time she could walk, Lahiri was bringing hurt animals home to help them heal.

Growing up, Lahiri helped not only animals but also her community in Bucks County, Pa., by volunteering in service projects. This led her to The Catholic University of America. Beyond the strong academic programs and professors, she knew that the service mission of the University was a good fit for her.

When she was a student, Lahiri — who graduated with a bachelor’s degree in psychology and English — thought her life might take an academic path. She wanted to conduct research in clinical psychology. After graduating in 1991, she worked in various corporations and did graduate work in anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1997, she founded Global Inclusion Strategies, a corporate consulting firm that helps organizations such as Coca-Cola and Pfizer address cultural issues that might affect their business goals.

In 2005, Lahiri, who was working as a corporate consultant, decided to use her skills to help animals. She started Indraloka as a nonprofit entity in 2007. In addition to her animal companions, financial stability was a priority. Lahiri works to publicize the sanctuary. In 2011, she produced a documentary about Indraloka titled Peace, Love, & Animals with her local filmmaker Johnny Bra. He continues to work at Indraloka, not only taking pictures and making videos, but also by helping with chores.

“Peace, Love, and Animals”

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When she moved in, her intention was to take care of the animals herself and support the sanctuary with her consulting business. She couldn’t find a home, perhaps because of her age, behavioral problems, or medical pattern of problems. Some shelters would or could no longer fit through the door of their shelter. One of Indraloka’s volunteers worked for the School of Architecture at Marywood University in Scranton, Pa. She mentioned the pigs’ plight to Kate O’Connor (B.S. 1993, B.Arch. 1996), an assistant professor in the school and an animal lover. O’Connor asked the volunteer to put her in touch with Lahiri.

When Lahiri and O’Connor met, the two had no idea they were both alumnae of Catholic University. They eventually made the connection and realized they probably had taken a philosophy course together. Although the two say they were very different in college — O’Connor was a soccer player, Lahiri was a self-described “hippie” — the duo now had a common goal as they began collaborating on a new house for the pigs.

As an architecture student at Catholic University, O’Connor says she developed “incredible design skills” that helped her open her own firm at age 38. She had worked on “design-build” projects with professors as a student and knew that hands-on projects were an invaluable way for students to learn. O’Connor reached out to

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“There’s a warm energy here. It’s hard work, but it doesn’t feel like work. I think the volunteers and the animals feel at peace. That makes this place magical.”
She founded the sanctuary on the principles that the earth and all life are sacred, and that all living beings are related.

to her own undergraduate students at Marywood, asking them to help design and build a new pig house. About half a dozen students volunteered to spend part of their summer on the project. To fit the sanctuary’s mission of environmental responsibility, they used as many recycled objects as possible, such as old billboards and wood from the barns.

The team researched wind direction to make sure prevailing winds would flow through the structure and provide ventilation in summer. They studied the position of the sun so they would know where to provide shade with the structure’s roof. They examined wall materials to find something that could withstand the pigs’ strength. They chose rammed earth, a combination of masonry sand, excavated dirt (from the structure’s site), and cement. Stronger than concrete, the walls are built in layers and insulated with easily replaceable straw, which makes the shelter cool in summer and warm in winter. To collect water, they built a butterfly roof so rain would funnel into a pool in the shade down a valley.

During the summer, the team would rise early a couple of days a week, drive an hour from Scranton to Mehoopany, and work as long as possible in the heat. Once the fall semester began, the team spent weekends working at Indraloka. O’Connor, the students, and volunteers completed the structure in December 2011 for a cost of about $1,100. O’Connor jokes.

“The Best Thing Ever”

Later on moving day, after Duncan and Nugget have had a little time to explore their new home, O’Connor arrives with Bart and Tao, his two basset hounds. O’Connor greets another familiar face, a cat named Luvbug, who rests in the shade of the roof until he’s chased away by one of the pigs. A mule in the next pasture cautiously approaches to check out her new pig neighbors. Lahiri, O’Connor, and Bajda crawl into the structure and coax the pigs to come in. When one of the pigs pokes through a hanging wooden door to enter, O’Connor cheers.

“That’s the best thing ever!” she exclaims.

“For Bajda, the project was inspiring. During the summer months, he would work a night-shift and then head to Indraloka at 6 a.m. ‘I’m from suburban New Jersey where you don’t see places like this,’” he explains. “The first day I was here, I fell in love with it and I just couldn’t stop coming.’”

O’Connor hopes to continue her partnership with Indraloka by bringing more of her students to the sanctuary to work on new building projects and to overhaul older structures. In fact, she’s already trading ideas with Lahiri for the old pig shelter.

“You could bring your students out in the summer and they could camp in tents here,” Lahiri suggests excitedly.

To O’Connor, Lahiri adds an intangible quality to Indraloka. “She creates a sense of place,” O’Connor explains.

All Life is Sacred

Lahiri, who is working on a book about what she considers to be sacred moments with her animals, believes no animal is too small or insignificant to treasure. She even refuses to kill the worms in the vegetable garden she and the volunteers are growing to provide food for a local soup kitchen and for the animals.

Lahiri has found the animals to be profound teachers of life lessons.

Sabine was a horse with chronic founder, a condition that causes the coffin bone in the foot to rotate, making standing very difficult. Sabine’s condition had been caused by severe neglect as her feet hadn’t been properly cared for. Although Sabine was sometimes in excruciating pain, Lahiri says she was always gentle. She recalls a very fearful pig that arrived at the sanctuary. Lahiri says Sabine would lie with the pig, which calmed her.

“She never lived in her pain,” Lahiri explains of Sabine, who has passed away.

“So many people came to her hurt and broken, and they would heal in her presence. She would take her head and drape it over another familiar face, a cat named Luvbug, who rests in the shade of the roof until he’s chased away by one of the pigs. A mule in the next pasture cautiously approaches to check out her new pig neighbors. Lahiri, O’Connor, and Bajda crawl into the structure and coax the pigs to come in. When one of the pigs pokes through a hanging wooden door to enter, O’Connor cheers.

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