

# Get to know TALENT @ SOFTCRYLIC

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When I was in high school, I had a dog and cats at my mom's house, but I really wanted something for my dad's house. It needed to be low maintenance, as I was only there two days a week, and my dad wanted no responsibility for its life (he'd already killed three betta fish, which is a talent in itself). So, I went on Craigslist and found a five-year old Chilean Rose Hair Tarantula! I met a girl at a gas station and, \$10 later, had my new best friend: MJ! She only eats a dozen crickets every two weeks. That was in 2011, and I have had her since that day! As she is Chilean, I just threw her a quinceanera for her 15th birthday in March.

As I progressed through college, I decided it was time to add to my little family. In 2014 I went back to Craigslist and found my next endeavor: Nigel the corn snake! Native to the Southeast US, corn snakes are also sometimes called oak or rat snakes, and we often see them with more muted colors here in the wild. However, his bright orange and red patterning would make him hawk bait if he were to live outside. Corn snakes are called this because their bellies are light colored with sporadic scales having dark brown or black colors, much like Native American corn. These snakes are known for being VERY curious, and, as such, he has gotten me into some crazy situations. One time, he crawled INSIDE my couch through the upholstery. We had to take the whole bottom off of the couch to get him out.

Fast forward another few years and I got Salazar the ball python! These snakes are native to the grasslands of Africa, but have been domesticated here in the US for decades. Known for their docile demeanor, these snakes are typically a reptile owner's first pet. They get their name from the fact that their preferred position is balled up. He is a cuddle bug. He will sit wrapped around my neck for hours at a time. Because snakes breed so readily, many reptile enthusiasts breed snakes with specific patterning and coloring objectives. While Salazar is considered a "normal" ball python, there are countless "morphs" with different colorations. He may be "normal" but he will always be beautiful to me.

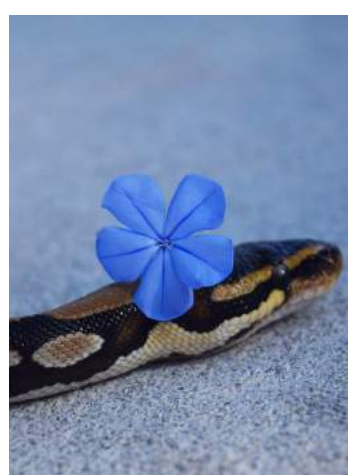
Next I got Cal, the New Caledonian Crested Gecko (aka Eyelash Gecko). These squishy lizards are ADORABLE. Some interesting tidbits about them:

1. Geckos can hold onto nearly any surface through Van der Waals forces, intermolecular polarization from an unequal distribution of electrons, allowing them to "stick" to surfaces
2. Though this species of geckos cannot change colors the way some of their relatives can, they do "fire up" and "fire down" depending on their surroundings. When Cal is fired up, his colors and patterns are very bright and contrasting, in shades of orangish brown and white. When he is fired down, he is a very muted tan, and very difficult to find in his cage
3. This species is one of the few that cannot regrow its prehensile tail. Many older geckos will have little nubs where they have lost their tails. They can drop them due to stress, infection, to escape a predator, or for many other reasons. Cal still has his! And he uses it as a fifth limb. He can reach out and "grab" surfaces with it, as the end has a pad similar to those on his toes that uses the same Van der Waals reactions to adhere to surfaces.

My newest family member is Nagini. She is a Vanilla Pewter ball python, so she is black, gray, and white. After having such a wonderful time with Salazar, I decided to add another ball python to our group. However, she is SASSY and not nearly as cuddly as her brother. Female ball pythons are known to be aggressive until they reach appx 3 years of age, so I'm attributing this to the Terrible Twos and letting her get away with way more than I probably should. She's lucky she's pretty...

Owning reptiles is fun and rewarding, but not for the feint of heart. It requires diligence and research, as they each have very specific requirements and challenges, and the information is not as

readily available or widely known as that for owning cats or dogs. If you are considering a new pet, it is imperative to do your research and set up their habitat before bringing your new friend home.





### 1. Are your snakes poisonous?

a. No snakes are While some snakes are venomous, those species require special licenses to have them in captivity, and my love for this hobby is not that intense.

A good rule of thumb is:

i. If you eat it and you die, it's poisonous.

ii. If it eats you and you die, it's venomous (which none of my snakes are)

b. However, MJ IS venomous! As her venom is designed to kill crickets, not grizzly bears, if she were to bite me, it would be like a bad bee sting, and not fatal.

i. Interestingly, most tarantulas have an additional defense mechanism called "urticating hairs" or "kicking hairs." These grow on the back of MJ's abdomen, and she can use her back legs to kick them off. They float around not unlike dandelion puffs and they ITCH. And are DIFFICULT TO WASH OFF. She has only intentionally done this to me one time, but I have accidentally brushed them onto myself several times.

### 2. How long are your pets expected to live?

a. MJ (tarantula) 15-20 years

b. Nigel (corn snake) 15-20 years

c. Salazar and Nagini (ball pythons) 20-30 years

d. New Caledonian Crested Gecko (Cal) 20 years

### 3. What do they eat?

a. The snakes eat frozen mice or rats, MJ eats crickets, and the gecko eats some rehydrated fruit paste that is actually DELICIOUS and I would eat it myself if it weren't so expensive by the ounce. Everyone except the gecko, who eats every day, eats only once every two weeks (and they poop just as infrequently!).

### 4. How big are they?

a. MJ is about the size of a drink coaster

b. Nigel is almost 5 feet long, but his diameter is only 1-1.5 inches. He weighs 460g

c. Salazar is appx 3 feet long, and his diameter is 2-3 inches. He weighs over 1200g!

d. Nagini (the same species as Salazar, though much younger) is appx 1.5 feet long, and her diameter is 1 inch. She weighs 500g

e. Cal (including tail) is about as long as my hand. He only weighs 75g

**5. Do you let the snakes roam free in your house?**

- a. No! With electrical wiring, unnaturally sharp edges, pest/insecticides, lack of freshwater sources, and many other issues, modern houses are very dangerous places for snakes. Plus, they are hiding masters, so I would probably never see them again.

**6. Have they ever escaped?**

- a. Nagini escaped for five days one time, but that has been my only security breach (so far). I found her in the living room exploring some plastic bags.

**7. Do you think they recognize you?**

- a. I do not think MJ, Nigel, or Cal recognize me. However, ball pythons are more biologically advanced, and I believe they do recognize me. One time, while standing in a group, I put Salazar on the ground and he followed me around. That's my only evidence, but I'm sticking to it because I like to think they love me back.