By Kelly Mayo
News Editor

Snakes. Spiders. Scorpions. For some people, these are the objects of nightmares. For Big Smiley’s Reptiles, they’re family.

The reptile house’s namesake and two helpers showed off several species of animals at Cruisin’ Pembroke on Main Street on Nov. 12. Visitors watched as the workers wore snakes around their shoulders and held scorpions and spiders in their gloved hands.

Visitors could touch the animals after cleaning their hands with hand sanitizer.

Life’s passion
Big Smiley is Lathan Levinur of Wagram, N.C. He said he has been doing educational shows with his reptiles around southern North Carolina for three years.

“Most of my shows are in Scotland County, Robeson County, some in Moore County,” Levinur said.

Levinur said it was one of these shows that made Cruisin’ Pembroke’s organizers notice him.

“I did a show in Laurinburg, and they asked me if I would come,” Levinur said.

Levinur said he keeps all kinds of snakes, “from pythons to cloudbirds.” He said he likes them because of their underdog status.

“They’re a misunderstood species. They keep diseases down, populations, all kinds of stuff,” he said.

Levinur said he gets the animals for Big Smiley’s by going to exotic shows and conferences. He is also a member of the United States Association of Rescue Keepers.

“I wish I could have gone to school to be a herpetologist, but I couldn’t go. I taught myself,” Levinur said.

Levinur also rescues injured animals.

“If I can get them back to health, I’ll release them,” Levinur said.

Cruisin’ reptiles
Levinur’s animals at Cruisin’ Pembroke included Rosie, a young Chilean Rose Hair tarantula.

“She’s not full grown yet. She’s still got a ways to go,” Levinur said.

Another popular feature with visitors was Levinur’s nameless Emperor Scorpion.

Levinur said she was a native of Africa and was nameless for a reason.

“She’s too mean to have a name,” Levinur said.

Big Smiley worker Grayson Amlons explained that a scorpion’s pinchers are even more painful than a crab’s.

“When they’re smaller and so sharper, it hurts,” Amlons said.

The most popular attraction with visitors, and Levinur’s self-proclaimed favorite, was Beauty the Burmese python.

“She’ll get to 35 to 40 feet long and 350 to 400 pounds,” Levinur said.

Levinur also showed visitors several kinds of turtles, including two he rescued after they were hit by cars.

Amlons has been working at Big Smiley’s Reptiles for two years. He said his favorite Big Smiley reptile was a banana King Snake not present at Cruisin’ Pembroke.

Levinur said he has always loved reptiles.

“I love all snakes. I love reptiles, period,” Levinur said.