

Behind the Scenes with the President

January 2009

Dear Friend of the Zoo,

“Three’s a herd.” Three years ago our quest for a third elephant started with that simple thought and as the wheels of our 747 touched down at Los Angeles International Airport last month, I knew our lives would change forever.

In Africa you see elephants in all configurations. You might see one or two and say, “I saw a lone bull” or “I saw some elephants.” But when you see three or more elephants together, you tend to refer to them as a herd.

Five years ago zoos around the nation began to take a closer look at how elephants are kept in captivity. Elephants are extremely smart and can capture a guest’s imagination like few other animals in the world. They are also very social and need companionship in order to thrive. Many elephant holding changes were recommended but the most significant was a commitment from AZA-accredited zoos that if a facility was going to have elephants, it would strive to hold at least three. About 30 zoos had only one or two elephants, including Cheyenne Mountain Zoo. These institutions had two options: surplus their elephants to another AZA-accredited zoo or try to put together a herd, which is what we have been doing since I became CEO in 2005.

Our long search eventually led to a single phone call from an individual outside the zoo field who told us about a woman who owned a single 22-year-old African elephant. The woman was in failing health and thought it might be time to get out of the elephant training business. After providing us with her phone number, our caller wished us good luck. “I know of at least five other zoos that are looking at her,” she said.

I made the phone call that very day. On the other end of the line a woman named Cheryl answered the phone. We spent nearly an hour talking that day. I told her all about our Zoo, about our two African elephant residents Kimba and Lucky and, most importantly, about who we are and our dreams for the future.

Over the course of several more conversations, Cheryl and I shared a lot of common ground. She liked us but we had the least to offer from a sale price stand point. We were not prepared to spend much money on an elephant given that we normally receive animals for free from other zoos.

On what I thought would be the last evening I would ever talk with Cheryl, she indicated she wanted to choose us but she had a very good offer from another zoo. And while she did not want this sale to be about the money, her health was failing fast and she needed to be able to provide for her own medical care. I delivered that message to the Board that same day in a prescheduled planning meeting. And they did something wonderful and bold. They told me to buy away any doubt that we were the best choice for Cheryl and our soon-to-be new elephant, Malaika. Within 24 hours I made an offer that was not quite as good as the other zoo, but it would test Cheryl’s resolve as it would be more

money up front with the zoo of her choice. The next day I was on a plane with our Director of Animal Collections and our Elephant Manager to meet with Cheryl and Malaika. As we drove to Thousand Oaks, California, that night we could hardly wait for morning to come.

Cheryl and Malaika lived in a beautiful oak-lined canyon at the edge of the mountains. The property was used as a training and holding facility for movie animals, including Malaika, who had not worked for about eight years. When we left that day we essentially had a deal without any paper work and no exchange of money. Cheryl said she chose us because of who we were and how we dealt with her. She only had two requests. First, keep the contract language simple. Second, don't ever send her to a sanctuary; keep her at an AZA-accredited Zoo.

I have been asked often, "How do you ship an elephant?" The answer: very carefully and in a heated, 45-foot semi-trailer.

Malaika arrived safe and sound on the night of Dec. 13, 2008. For the first time since elephants were introduced at Cheyenne Mountain Zoo in 1953, we finally had a herd. And Kimba and Lucky saw another African elephant for the first time in almost 30 years.

I'm sure you're curious about Kimba and Lucky's reaction to the new elephant. Lucky, the rambunctious one who we thought might have issues, acted as if she'd known Malaika her whole life. Who knows, maybe she had. Kimba, on the other hand, knew something had just changed in her world. Kimba is the dominate elephant in our group and likes everyone to know who's boss. But how do you do that when you can't touch for 30 days due to quarantine regulations? All I can tell you is it seems to have something to do with flapping your big ears and saying "I am big and I mean business" in your toughest body language. And when that fails, as apparently it did, Kimba picks up water in the tip of her trunk, curls it quickly and flings it like a glop of snot and says, "Take that, new girl."

With warm regards,



Bob Chastain
President & CEO
Cheyenne Mountain Zoo