

BEHIND THE SCENES WITH THE PRESIDENT

February 26, 2016

Dear Friend,

It's been a while since you last heard from me. Let me assure you it's not for lack of interesting things happening at the Zoo. In fact, just the opposite is true. But this story is not about the wonderful happenings – or even about our amazing animals. What I actually want to share with you is how amazing and wonderful our donors are. Each of you touches us in a unique and personal way. This letter is about the impact that one very special donor had on me and the life lessons that I learned from this incredible individual.

You may know him. His name is Bob Mollo. I was recently asked by his wife Judy to speak at his funeral.

I was honored to be asked and a little bit afraid. I was also conflicted on what I would say. Would I talk about Bob or would I talk about his impact on Cheyenne Mountain Zoo. I wanted to honor him by not only talking about the memories I have of him, but the lessons he taught me.

I met Bob 20 years ago. I was a young 29-year-old horticulture curator at Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, newly married without kids, and had recently moved west after growing up in Indiana. Of course, at that age, I knew everything. Or so I thought. Looking back I had several more things to learn.

Bob and I shared the world's greatest and most simple name. You can hardly mess it up as long as you get the o in between the two b's. You can spell it the same way forward and back. I remember a lunch at the Garden of the Gods Club and every man at the table was named Bob. It seemed we were multiplying. That was one of my earliest memories of Bob, and he asked me to lead a prayer before we ate. From then on, he always asked me to share a prayer before we ate. I just want to spend a minute on how unusual that was. I have had hundreds of donor lunches over the years and only two of those donors have ever asked me to pray before we ate. Bob always made me feel like I did a good job with those prayers. It's not something I ever felt very confident about. Bob helped me feel confident in many things as we became friends. Lesson #1 I learned from Bob: "Worry less and pray more."

Bob, a former military officer, was newly retired from a second career, and married to his lovely wife Judy. He was making plans to build a butterfly garden at the Zoo in her honor. He had already committed the money before I came. I will never forget our first meeting.

He made it very clear that the first check would not arrive until he knew what kind of person I was. Within weeks he gave me the first check to build the garden and doubled the original amount. I like to think that meant he trusted me, but in retrospect it could have been more about his love for Judy. We became fast friends and Judy has a beautiful garden at the Zoo, although it is now in a new location. Lesson #2: "People give to projects and to people." So be the sort of person who can be trusted.

There is a quote I like, "A man's message will be heard in the context of his character."

A favorite story Bob shared with me was about the time, as a young aviator, he was flying a combat mission. He was with a new navigator and they were flying a low mission. It was a long flight and Bob had been napping while they were en route. He tells of how he woke just in time to tell the crew they were about ready to smash into a mountain. The navigator had “done his math wrong” and was using the river they were following as a sea level calculation instead of 1,000 feet above sea level. Bob was astounded that a navigator would think all rivers are at sea level. But then Bob was one of the most brilliant mathematicians I have ever known. Years later when my own son was in high school Bob would tutor him in math. Bob was always willing to help.

Lesson #3: “Do the work required to create the world you want.” Bob believed in a better world and he worked to make it better. He believed in a world with wonderful, amazing animals. He believed in a safe place for families to connect with those animals and he believed in a place Colorado Springs could be proud of. I know this because of what Bob said and most importantly because of what Bob did. He and Judy have been involved in every imaginable project at Cheyenne Mountain Zoo. They helped build homes for tigers, leopards, giraffe, zebra, vultures, meerkats, lions, elephants, rhinos, butterflies, and many more. If you’ve been to the Zoo, you’ve seen his impact.

I want to close by sharing one more lesson I learned early from Bob. Unfortunately, it’s a lesson I’ve had to keep learning, and that is living a life without regret.

It was a sunny day in May and we were kicking off our annual plant sale at the Zoo. Bob was there to support it as he always was. It was then that I found out Bob had not only lost a son to a tragic accident, but a few years later he’d also lost his first wife, Ann. He talked about that day his wife died and the regrets he had. How he wished he had made her drive their safer car. I remember thinking at the time, people who lose spouses and children are either bitter, or among the most resilient and loving people I know. Bob was resilient and loving.

Years later as my own family went through tragedy I thought back to Bob’s story and doubled down on my effort to live without regret. I was determined to tell the people I love how I feel, and to treat those I love like I might not see them again. I’ve been better about that because of Bob. And so it is curious that I left some things with Bob unsaid and undone.

There is a song called “Glorious Day” by Casting Crowns I had always intended to play for him. The song reminds me of Bob and I wanted to share it with him and tell him what he meant to me. The day Bob died, I closed our relationship the same way it started: I prayed. I asked God to play my song for him and tell him I was sorry I never did that myself. Lesson #4: “Live and love like today is your last day.”

Godspeed, Bob.

With warmest regards,

Bob Chastain
President & CEO