

BEHIND THE SCENES WITH THE PRESIDENT

March 2019

Dear Friend,

It would be easy to think that the best thing about working with animals is the animals. As a self-proclaimed introvert, professional plantsman and nature lover, I could definitely buy into that thinking. You can only imagine my surprise when I realized the best thing about working with animals is working with animal people. And I don't just mean keepers. I mean animal lovers of all types from all walks of life. A friend of mine who is a judge is currently dealing with a very difficult case that speaks to the worst of what humans are. I left him a message just to remind him that there are still plenty of amazing people out there.

Last year about 800,000 guests – including approximately 20,000 member households – visited Cheyenne Mountain Zoo. Let's just assume that ten percent of them are bad tempered, otherwise preoccupied, or just plain grumpy or mean. It would be easy to get discouraged by the 80,000 visitors that fit that description. And with more than 300 people employed here in the summer, it can be dispiriting working with the 30 or so that don't fit our culture and world view. But for me, the real magic started to happen when I paid attention to the 720,000 amazing guests, 18,200 member families and the 270 remarkable employees. It's not that I am blind or a softie. (No one has ever said that about me.) Each of us makes a choice how we want to see the world and what I choose to see more of these days is hope. I have a card on my desk that says, "The charm of fishing is that it is the pursuit of what is elusive but attainable, a perpetual series of occasions for hope."

I recently returned from a trip to Belize. A couple of our employees have been going down to the Belize Zoo on their own time to help them improve animal welfare using our style of training and enrichment. They have been doing this for a number of years and invited me along to talk about the safety work we have been doing here and some of the systems we put into place while I was the Chair of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums Safety Committee. There is a small section in our strategic plan that addresses helping non-accredited facilities improve their animal welfare. This was a chance for me to support this part of the plan personally.

I couldn't have been more proud of our team: Amy, Rebecca and Megan. They are really changing the world. While this story could easily have been about them, it's actually about an employee at the Belize Zoo named Roxy. Amy told me about her before the trip and said something to the effect of "she does not look traditional but she is awesome." I remembered that observation when I met Roxy; she has more tattoos and piercings than would be allowed at Cheyenne Mountain Zoo. However, it only took a short time with Roxy to realize how amazing she is. She loves the animals there and is passionate about learning. Roxy is in her mid-20s and lives with her sister. Like most Belizeans she does not have a car. She arrives at work between 7:30 and 8am. Pretty normal, right? What is not normal is that she walks half an hour to a bus stop where she takes a two-hour bus ride to the zoo, requiring her to rise at 4:30am. She told me mornings can be dangerous because it is still dark and she has to guard against the threat of sexual assault, kidnapping and robbery. It's a little shorter on the way home because she can often share a local cab. Still, that's nearly five hours of commuting every day. Under the words passion and dedication in the dictionary it could say ... see Roxy.

We have an employee who works in Grizzly Grill with a similar story (minus the constant threat of violence). Kevin is a young man with a huge smile and a quick hello. I learned recently that he worked in our gift shop when he was younger – back when we sold soft serve ice cream there. Apparently if you ordered ice cream and they were out, Kevin would run uphill to the grill to fill your ice cream order and then run back down. This after having ridden his bike to work because he too did not have a car. His work ethic combined with his passion for providing outstanding customer service adds to our guests' unforgettable experiences.

Without a doubt, the people who support Cheyenne Mountain Zoo are an incredible group. But what makes this Zoo different from most is that with every visit you get to save animals. Every time. That's because 75 cents from every admission goes directly to field conservation – projects that help wildlife. Flash back to those 800,000 people I referenced earlier. Those visits resulted in over half a million dollars going to wildlife. And each guest gets to vote on what project is most meaningful to them. The other day I was in the admissions plaza describing this to a potential Cheyenne Mountain Zoo conservation partner. Just then a family came in with a young boy. As we watched, he approached a voting slot, touched the picture of the animal and said, "I am going to save you." Then he put the quarter in the slot and watched it roll down the ramp into the collection pot.

I could share compelling stories about many of you too. Whether you are the donor who lost two children and a wife, the patron who had a career in the fire service, or those who have served our country in the military (three who are Air Force Academy graduates, one who was one of the highest ranking military officers of his time) – each of you makes a difference in the lives of animals. You inspire hope for the future and continue to inspire me, even after 24 years. Every month when we orient new employees I share with them how special you are, reminding them that you are just like us. Passionate about people – sometimes. Passionate about animals – always. And endlessly passionate about making the world better.

Warmly,

Bob Chastain
President & CEO