

## BEHIND THE SCENES WITH THE PRESIDENT

May 6, 2014

Dear Friend,

I work at an odd, odd place. And, by some great stroke of luck, you have allowed me to work here long enough for it to feel normal. I've been here long enough now that even the people close to me think I am exaggerating my tenure. I am not. This year will be my 19<sup>th</sup>.

Yesterday morning was one of those glorious days in Colorado Springs. I say that like they are rare, but in reality, we all know they happen here more than most other places in our world. I spent the morning doing what I do every spring, looking for new parking spaces. I always think I will find some magic new spaces. Sometimes I do; many times I don't. On the way back from my parking tour, I noticed something new in Jumbe's (our black rhino) yard. I went to have a look and a chat with Jason, the elephant and rhino manager who was "setting up" the yard. Again, I say this like it is a normal thing and you will know just what I mean, but I know from experience you won't really, because most people don't get to do what we do. Only a few people in the world get to set up a yard for a shy black rhino - or any black rhino for that matter. Let me share something that might surprise you: we have one of only 47 black rhinos in the entire United States! We also have three of the country's only 77 Nile hippopotamuses, one of its 106 Komodo dragons, one of its 17 sarus cranes, three of its 32 Cape Griffon vultures and two of its 70 two-toed sloths. To put it plainly, there are just not that many of these animals in the U.S. Cheyenne Mountain Zoo has a great assortment of rare and beautiful animals, one that even a much larger zoo would be proud of. The next time you come to your Zoo and see three of the nation's 34 black mangabeys, count us all very lucky. We couldn't do this without you.

Back to my story - as I watched Jason set up the yard, adding items to Jumbe's space to keep him mentally and physically engaged and active, I had this strange feeling that this situation - this, right now - is exactly why people love and are fascinated by keepers. This is the kind of thing people think they do all day. Of course that's not always true, but on this particular day and at this particular time, it is absolutely and wonderfully true. You see, our shy rhino isn't the only one that gets this kind of treatment. We put toys, enrichment and treats out for our animals each and every day. We hide them, hang them from trees, put them on springs and bungee cords. We hang them on cables that allow them to come zip-lining into exhibits, and we do a hundred other things to keep life interesting. This is how we set up an animal's yard; it is normal for us to spend hours figuring out new ways to keep our animals stimulated and happy. You can practice this same fun with your animals at home. Many pets are in their "exhibits" (yard, house, birdcage) 12 hours a day. You should try to "set up" their exhibit sometime. They will love it.

Start simple. Just hide some treats in the yard or put some peanut butter in the bottom of a safe plastic jar and your dog will spend hours licking it out. If you hide treats, be prepared because our pets are so used to not being active that they may not find them all. Start by hiding treats close to the door and slowly work your way to farther and better hiding spots. By doing this, you will teach them that searching has value. But I digress...

Later that day Jason, who is a strong, silent, fit guy, comes strolling past my office with a big, cheesy black backpack. Even though he rarely talks, I can tell he has his special “cat that ate a canary” grin. The backpack is full. There are bright orange things in its mesh water bottle holders. When I ask him what’s up, he tells me it's his new invention - a rhino babysitting day pack. It is packed with everything he needs to keep our shy rhino Jumbe comfortable in the exhibit. It holds things like a long-handled tire brush for scratching him, some treats like the carrots in the mesh water bottle holders, an air horn for Jason’s safety in case Jumbe gets too frisky when Jason is scratching him. Jason wishes the pack included some sunscreen because he got sunburned earlier in the day. The backpack comes in handy all the time. Jason regularly stops and scratches Jumbe with the long handled brush and gives him the treats - either carrots, yams or apples. We are trying to teach him that his exhibit is great fun, so keepers stop and show him random acts of kindness when he is in his yard. And why wouldn’t he think that? If people stopped by my office randomly with cards, snacks and an occasional scratching with a long handled brush, I might like it better too.

When I think about all the weird “normal” days I’ve had here, it seems as though the 19 years have passed by like the snap of my fingers. I feel lucky to be here, to be doing this work. There’s a board down in the keeper break room that says, “You know you have been here a long time when...” Answers include:

- “A giraffe calf is born and it’s just another day.”
- “Someone speaks loudly and you reach for your radio to turn it down.”
- “You know where the saying ‘Just because you look like a man doesn’t mean you have to act like a man’ came from.”
- “You still refer to the Budgie building as the Shorebird building.”
- “You hear your radio in your head on your ride home.”
- And my favorite, because it sums up just how strange and wonderful this place is: “You see duct tape on a keeper’s crotch and you don’t ask questions.”

I can't thank you enough for all your support over my 19 years here, and especially my last nine years as president. Your support and kindness toward the Zoo, our animals, our staff and our building projects never ceases to amaze me. Despite several years that were rocky for many people, today the Zoo is stronger and more stable than ever. Our fiscal year just ended with a record attendance of almost 650,000; 222,000 more guests than ten years ago. Thank you for making this possible.

Warmly,

Bob Chastain  
President & CEO