

BEHIND THE SCENES WITH THE PRESIDENT

June 12, 2012

Dear Friend,

It was the best of times; it was the worst of times...so starts *A Tale of Two Cities*. This letter is hardly a famous literary work. It is, however, a tale of three families.

I have long believed in the value of families spending time together at the Zoo. Even our strategic plan talks about connecting people with animals and each other. I once toyed with a slogan that said, "Where families go to make memories." For years, when asked what it is we do, I would describe a three-legged stool, with each leg being Community, Culture, and Collection Management.

Lately, I have been dividing our work down two lines, the first being conservation work. Within conservation work, I describe a long game (educating people on the importance of animals and the natural world to our health and happiness) and the short game (using captive breeding and field conservation to keep extremely endangered species from going extinct). The second dividing line is providing a place where our community comes to build relationships with each other and the natural world. I have been describing what we do for a long time, but last Friday I experienced it again in a big way through the eyes of three separate families.

Imagine if you can, the following three events happening in a single day at the Zoo, each giving us a small look into the lives we touch everyday. I can vouch for the truth in these circumstances because I experienced them all first-hand on the first Friday in June. The first is the story of a 12-year-old girl on the verge of turning 13...a big day by any standard. She had been planning her birthday party for ten friends for weeks, hand-making each invitation to a group of girls destined to celebrate her transition into the teen years.

As life often does, the curve ball came when, at the last minute, only three girls showed up. You can imagine the heartbreak and disappointment. Mom made the decision to do something special with the small group and packed up and came to the Zoo. Two hours later, the girls had forgotten all about the heartbreak and could not believe what the others were missing. A bond was formed and the beginnings of new relationships were forged out of the rough twisted steel we call life. The day ended with smiles and memories, making the disappointment that will surely linger in the mind of a young girl distant and soft.

The second is a family that had two young nephews in from out of town. The boys have had a rough upbringing and don't have all the luxuries that a stable family life brings, but lucky for them their aunt and uncle make a commitment to bring them to their house for a week each year, showing them a tiny slice of normal. The boys have been challenged with some poverty, lack of family structure and some learning disabilities that come with all of the above. However, this day was different. They were normal boys visiting one of the top ten zoos in the nation. To hear the excitement in their voices as they called me "President Bob" and told me of the day's events reminded me that we serve all ages and all walks of life.

The final story is less clear in my mind and I will fully admit that I can only guess at what lie inside this mother's mind, but for me, her soft, wounded, tired eyes told me what I needed to know to take a guess at the truth. This special Friday also happened to be Dream Night at the Zoo. Dream Night was started in Holland when two people at the Rotterdam Zoo decided to give critically and chronically ill children a free night at their zoo. Since then, it has spread worldwide and we have been observing this day since 2005. It is the only free night our Zoo offers the entire year and we cover the expenses through our operating budget and our volunteer efforts. Both the staff and Zoo volunteers donate their time to make it a success.

I worked pony rides that night, lifting children on and off the ponies, giving them free rides around the arena. The mom was a young thirty-something with a fashionable green hat and shoulder-length brown hair. You could tell from her style, beauty and gentle spirit that she had imagined her life differently than this. Different than standing in a line, watching her daughter slip away while she rode around the ring. There wasn't a complaint on her lips though, as she did what mothers do and looked comfortingly on, encouraging her daughter with her eyes, her smile and her heart. It was all I could do, trying not to stare or cry. I busied myself with other kids and other lives to pass that moment while it was quietly marked deep in my heart.

You see, I know a little something about young mothers and death and the look they get in their eyes. How they thought things might be different, but never complain in the presence of anyone or anything that would tip their daughter off to the fact that they are anything but happy and they are anything but under control. Dream Night at Cheyenne Mountain Zoo started the year my niece died from a brain tumor. It was the year that my sister was that mother. Not literally that mother, but a young thirty-something, too. Attractive and fit, just ready to take on life with style, grace, and vigor before the news came late one day. I am certain that mom could have been, and maybe was your mom, your sister, your daughter, your neighbor, your niece.

The Zoo cannot be all things to all people. We simply don't have the resources to do that. But on this day, to this mom, to these three families, we were exactly what they needed. Joy first and then hope.

Warmly,

Bob Chastain
President & CEO