

Behind the Scenes with the President

August 7, 2009

Dear Friends of the Zoo,

I am intrigued by life, inspired by things that are visually interesting. Just days ago, my mind was unable to wrap itself around the scene in front of me. A scene seemingly parallel to an ancient prophecy that says “one day, the lion will lie down with the lamb.”

Our aging mountain lion, Dakota, lay on the table in front of me as our new Rocky Mountain goat kid followed the veterinarian around the surgery room like a homesick puppy. As the young goat circled like an old dog looking for a soft place to lie, a critical decision was being made about Dakotas’s future. The goat lay down under the table full of instruments and settled in for the long haul. Everyone took a slow, deep breath.

Keepers gathered around Dakota as she lay anesthetized on the operating table. Failing joints and an abscess in her mouth drove the decision to euthanize this very old member of our family, but for now she was alive and people were struggling to say goodbye.

Dakota had long been on our quality of life “watch,” and we all knew this day would come. A quality of life determination is a process almost every euthanized animal goes through. Both scientific and emotional, the process seeks answers to questions like: Are they eating? What is their weight? What should it be? Do they still interact with the world and their environment? Do they move normally? Every box gets checked and every heart gets searched as the question of, “Is it time?” gets answered.

I’ve witnessed this final scene many times during my tenure here. When you deal with life, you most certainly will deal with death. Our unspoken mission: to provide the best of care from the beginning of life to the end of life, and everything in between. Unsure of how to cope with the last moments of life, staff quietly and reflectively touched the fur and stood amazed at the creature before them. As for me, I always look at their feet. I guess it is my interest in animal tracking that makes me want to see the details of a life spent on their feet; that tiny plane of skin that connects the animal’s spirit and body with the earth below.

As a leader you are not always sure what to do or say in times like this. What do you say amongst the tears of people who have made this cat a life-long friend? I did what I always do, I told a story.

Out of the silence I said, “Dakota was the first animal to teach me about exhibit design and how great animals make great exhibits.” I could almost hear people relax and continued, “Dakota used to occupy the corner exhibit at the monkey pavilion when it was the cat house. Although the building was old and small, she made her exhibit great. She would crouch upon this old log, suspended above our guests, leaving them amazed by her

instinctive talents. You can see now why we designed the new mountain lion exhibit with so much overhead space.” With those small words the room grew loud, like a symphony of emotion, as people began to recount their own memories of her.

After a time, there was nothing left to say except the words you will never say aloud. The ones you hide in your heart and the quiet contemplation about things that are the mystery of life. As the injection entered her body the breathing slowed to nothing and for a moment, life stopped. Only this, like all last moments, will live forever in our thoughts.

With all our love, Dakota

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Bob Chastain". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Bob" and the last name "Chastain" clearly distinguishable.

Bob Chastain
President & CEO