

BEHIND THE SCENES WITH THE PRESIDENT

November 2011

Dear Friend,

Do you remember the day after Thanksgiving? I do. I awoke in the morning to the squelch of my Volunteer fire department radio and the voice of the dispatcher saying, “Northeast Teller County Fire and Woodland Park Ambulance, stand by for a bomb threat page.” It’s not exactly how I planned on spending my post-holiday morning, but I am glad I did.

A bomb scene runs something like this: the people inside the building (in this case the employees at Walmart) do an evacuation of the building while emergency personnel respond to the scene. Fire, Police, and Ambulance personnel all work to form a perimeter, making sure people stay clear of the area while looking for anyone suspicious leaving the area. And then...we wait. And wait. And wait. What are we waiting for? A dog. And one very brave handler.

As I watch all of this take place from the safety of our Hazmat Truck, I’m struck by the connection that people have with animals. In the case of a bomb threat, people do very little to determine if the area is safe. Instead, thousands of people will trust their lives to a dog’s nose, only reentering the building when he gives the “all clear.”

This experience illustrates a habit I have that drives people nuts; I never leave work, even while responding to a Fire Department emergency. (Editor’s Note: This is true. He drives us nuts.) I can’t help it. I have a burning passion to help people understand that wildlife and wild places are crucial to the health and happiness of communities around the world. A big part of my job is to always ask, “What’s next, what’s next, what’s next?” This experience planted a seed in my mind, and I began to think about the role that domestic animals play in our mission. I started wondering whether it would fit within our mission to consider expanding our domestic animal opportunities. How could we help our guests understand the critical ways that domestic animals impact our lives every day?

Clearly, when the Zoo breeds a rare animal and fights extinction through hard science, it is a mission-critical action. And we’re good at it. In fact, since the mid-90’s we have released more than 200 black-footed ferrets to the wild. It’s easy to understand why that’s important. What is less clear, but just as important, is how ponies, dogs, cats, goats and other animal experiences make the world a healthier and happier place.

As this “connecting people with animals” question continued to intrigue me, I did some quick research, which brought up volumes of data on how animals can help people. I read about how horse and pet therapy can greatly benefit children with autism, and about how experiences with domestic pets can significantly improve the quality of life for all people. It would not take much research to expand this positive impact to many other medical, emotional, and developmental issues. As a parent, it’s interesting to think about the positive impact that simple animal experiences can have on your family.

For example, we had a four-year-old little boy who rode the ponies this last summer. Our keepers sensed that he might have some type of special needs. His mom told Beth, our Pony Wrangler, that he probably would not answer any questions because he did not talk to other people. As the boy began his pony ride, Beth talked to him about the pony he was riding. When she told the little boy that sometimes they call him Sunny Bunny instead of just Sunny, the kid started to laugh!

Beth joked with him about feeding the giraffes and he started talking to her. He was actually answering questions. His mom heard him talking and was surprised. She told Beth she couldn't believe she got him talking because he barely speaks to them and he never talks to strangers.

It turns out our Wranglers are very good with kids and that ponies have magic powers. Another mom had a similar experience with her son. By the end of the ride, the mom was in tears and nearly sobbing. She said he rarely even spoke to them and she couldn't believe he was talking to the Wrangler while riding. Mind you, these rides are five minutes long and three to five loops around a small yard the size of half a basketball court.

We have a regular guest with a ten-year-old son who has cerebral palsy. Our keepers were talking to the mom about therapeutic riding and how beneficial it can be for kids with special needs. The boy's mom worried that her son wasn't strong enough, but the keepers encouraged her to give it a try. A few months later, mom and son returned and told the keepers about their experience at one of the local therapeutic riding stables. She told them about the drastic change she had seen in her son, and credited the riding therapy and the Zoo with making her son a different boy, one that was both physically and emotionally stronger.

If a few laps around the pony yard can make differences like these, imagine what a lifetime with animals could do.

I could write volumes on the stories I hear about how our domestic animals (not only ponies, but also the goats, chickens, and others in My Big Backyard and the Loft) make a difference in the lives of our guests, but I think you probably get the picture. And you get it because you are the Zoo. It's your support that allows us to do the important work that we do. You're the reason that we're able to connect people with animals, both exotic and domestic. We're grateful that, again and again, you have proved that you believe in the power of animals to make the world a better place. We believe too.

Warmly,

Bob Chastain
President & CEO