

BEHIND THE SCENES WITH THE PRESIDENT

February 2020

Dear Person,

There is a scene in the movie, *The Guardian*, which I love. In the scene, a young man is being mentored by a seasoned U.S. Coast Guard rescue swimmer. The decorated officer, played by Kevin Costner, has been assigned to teach while going through a difficult time after having lost his entire crew in a rescue-gone-wrong. The young man is an extremely talented rebel, trying to act tough and do life alone due to an early loss of his high school swim team, whose names are tattooed on his arm. When all of this comes to a head and the young man is nearly ready to get kicked out of the rescue swimmer program, his mentor says, as directly and compassionately as possible, "I want you to start being a member of this team. The team you have now. You have a gift, Jake. You're the best swimmer to come through this program hands down by far... But you know what I see when I look at you? I see someone fast enough who is going to get there first. I see someone strong enough who's going to last. I see someone who can save a life that maybe no one else could. If you really want to honor the initials on your arm, honor your gift."

By the time you receive this letter you will have heard about our young mountain lion named Sequoia -- one of three orphaned mountain lion cubs brought to our zoo last year from Washington state -- that died from complications resulting from a common spaying procedure. What you don't know is what happened behind the scenes. What a group of "fast swimming," strong staff did to try to save a life that everyone was shocked to see slipping away.

The call came on Sunday evening while I was having dinner with family visiting from out of town. The next morning, after the shock wore off, I was on the phone before 7 am, communicating with our VP of animal health as we figured out how to get everyone to an 8:30 am meeting to console one another, regroup and discuss how to tell the staff, our board and the community about what happened. It was during this meeting that a concern arose about Sequoia's sister, Adira, since she was genetically related and we worried whether the sutures had dissolved due to some rare allergic reaction.

I am honestly not trying to make the challenges of that day out to be more than they were. Every day, each of us is confronted by challenges; some much larger than this. Each of us has a special gift to share with the world. We can do things that are easy enough for us that would be a huge help to others. I wish this forum allowed me to talk with you about your gifts because this letter would be filled with awesome examples of what you are doing. For example, I'm thinking about a person we all know who works with youth and their journeys in life -- striving to guide them, encourage them, but show them actions have consequences. Another person I'm thinking of is working to address mental health issues. Another works to build a better community ... another delivering on a campaign

promise ... another teaching. Finally, I'm thinking of many I know whose gifts provide financial support to our community's many worthy causes and projects.

After finishing our debrief that morning, I went to a pre-scheduled meeting with a couple of experts in mindfulness – an exciting, quick and accessible technique they teach to help our entire team maintain mental and emotional wellness. Research has shown that people who are caretakers of animals experience as much stress as those who serve as firemen or other first responders – a sort of caretakers syndrome. The trainers asked us to imagine our best day with as much detail as we could. While it may seem odd, I imagined that day as one of my best days and here is why:

I get to work with Jenny and Rachel. They are in charge of our marketing and branding efforts, which include public relations and social media. They wrote and revised the press release about Sequoia a dozen times because I wanted to get it right. When the public trusts you, you work hard to keep it. We discussed what words best described what we were feeling -- shock, surprise, heartbreak, sadness, devastation. We wanted to be authentic. Working through challenges with great people somehow just feels better.

It was my best day because of the board-certified veterinary surgeon that selflessly helped with Sequoia. He himself had just recently had a difficult surgery, but despite that fact and that he was not even a part of the original spaying procedure, he dropped everything and came. His expertise saved us precious time during surgery even though the damage to Sequoia's GI tract was insurmountable.

It was my best day because of our dedicated animal keepers, who just lost a beloved friend. They possibly spend more time with our animals than you spend with some of your best friends. Still reeling from the shock, they had to get Adira to accept a hand injection to anesthetize her so her incision could be checked. If they failed, the cat likely would have been frightened by the dart gun and in the ensuing chaos risked tearing open an otherwise healing surgical site. In particular, I'm thinking of our keeper Sarah, who came to us from Columbus Zoo. She used all her built relationship with the cats, her knowledge and experience – plus a bit of whipped cream – to get Adira to line up and allow herself to be poked with a syringe full of meds, much like you or I would get a flu shot. Backing her up that day was keeper Basia, who works with tigers and leopards. Oddly enough, Basia is allergic to the mountain lions but not lions, tigers or leopard. She gets a sneezing fit if she is around the mountain lions but was there to support a nervous teammate. Adira was happy with her whipped cream treat and went right to sleep.

Finally, it was my best day because of our vet team. They feel responsible for Sequoia's death. And they are responsible, but not for her death. Surgery is complex and unpredictable. Responsible is also different than blamable. As a leader in our community, I know you understand the difference. The vet team is made up of people who care for animals every day. They often literally hold an animal in that tipping point between life and death. Yet, they are not gods. They are just people who do their best every day to protect some of the most endangered species on the planet. The morning after the surgery had to be emotionally challenging for them, and yet they were responsible for attending a meeting to discuss what went wrong and what needed to happen going forward.

By 10:30 am that morning, Sequoia's sister Adira was on the table. Thank goodness everything at the surgery site looked good. But as we all know ... life is a journey of challenges and opportunities. On the x-ray there was clearly something there; something that looked like cable or wire or rope. Deciding what to do after a tragedy could stifle many people but I saw them work together, calculate risk and decide to wake the cat and devise a future plan of action.

As you've undoubtedly already learned, on that Thursday our vet team and veterinary professionals from Powers Pet Emergency and Specialty removed a 19-inch rubber-coated cord from Adira's stomach. As any parent of a young child or any pet owner can attest, children and animals are prone to investigating and ingesting things they shouldn't.

I don't know, perhaps this is not particularly interesting. The point is there are people out there doing amazing things, difficult and complicated things – even at times boring things. And it makes the world brighter for people and wildlife.

But here is what I do know. We're all on that crazy life journey, sharing our gifts where we can. There is certainly so much about you that I don't ever get to know; so many richly deep stories of how you are making the world better. I hope in a quiet moment you will share them with me because they bring me hope.

In life there are so many challenges, so much heartache, so much opportunity that we would do well to remember the theme of that line in the movie, "If you really want to honor the people in your life that helped make you what you are, then honor your gift." Whatever that may be. Do something for someone or something that maybe only you can do.

As for me and our Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, I am grateful for you and I am grateful for those that I have the honor of working with ... Jenny and Rachel and Sarah and Basia and Jon and Brenda and Eric and Liza and Tracey and Jeff ... and for the little time I knew her, Sequoia.

Warmly,

Bob Chastain
President & CEO