

The Center for Captive Chimpanzee Care:

A volunteer's report on a visit to remember

story and photos by Ardeth Baxter



Top and center: Volunteers prepare paper bag enrichment treats containing dried fruit, peanuts and shredded paper. Bottom: Pine cones covered with peanut butter and raisins are another treat. These food puzzles give the chimpanzees the opportunity to exercise their minds and relieve the boredom of confinement.

Robert...James...Holly...Terrance...Jello...Muffin...Raymond...Eason...Donna...Echo...and Gina are just a few of the unfortunate chimpanzees who will never enjoy the freedom other Air Force Chimps are finally experiencing in the sanctuary Dr. Carole Noon is creating.

Before the dream of so many people could be realized, they and others died from gross negligence or lack of proper medical care while imprisoned by the Coulston Foundation, the biomedical research laboratory that had the worst animal care record in the country. From 1997 on, TCF was investigated at least ten times by the USDA and charged four times for violations of the Animal Welfare Act. Finally, after losing funding from the NIH, the bankrupt Fred Coulston approached chimpanzee sanctuary director Dr. Carole Noon for help.

That was the beginning of wonderful new lives for the chimps. In September, 2002, thanks to a generous \$3.7 million grant from the Arcus Foundation of Kalamazoo, Michigan, Dr. Noon took over the facility. The 266 chimpanzees and 61 monkeys also benefited from the Doris Day Animal League, Animal Rights Foundation of Florida, Friends of Washoe, In Defense of Animals, New England Anti-Vivisection Society, and Animal Protection of New Mexico, which all played a role in their freedom and assurances of good care in the future.

The former Coulston lab in Alamogordo, New Mexico, resembles an army barracks on the outside and a prison on the inside (see photo on page 9).

Most of the approximately 50 chimps in Building 300 remain temporarily housed individually in 5 x 7-foot cages of heavy metal separated by solid concrete walls, which allows them to see only the chimpanzees across the aisle from them. That won't be the case for long.

These innocent victims will be among the first chimps from Alamogordo relocated to Dr. Noon's Ft. Pierce, Florida, sanctuary in just three or four years to live on man-made islands in family groups. The males have undergone vasectomies in preparation for being placed in mixed sex groups. All the plans and preparations are under way.

In contrast, all the chimps housed in Buildings 700 and 800 live in same sex groups, with meshed windows between some of the cages, and larger outdoor cages. These chimps may not be relocated for another eight to ten years, when the Alamogordo facility will probably be closed down. For now, the facility has become part of the Center for Captive Chimpanzee Care (CCCC), and the improvements in treatment for the animals are swift and effective.

The CCCC was established in 1997 with the help of the DDAL and Drs. Jane Goodall and Roger Fouts. Its purpose is to house the former Air Force chimpanzees and their descendants in permanent retirement. The first 21 chimps arrived at the 150-acre sanctuary in St. Lucie County, Florida, in April, 2001. Since the CCCC takeover of Coulston, a small number of juvenile chimps from the former lab have also been transported to Florida to begin their new lives.

A pilot volunteer program at the Alamogordo CCCC, organized by Animal Protection of New Mexico and initiated in early 2003, provides an unprecedented opportunity for animal supporters (like me!) to assist with various tasks at the new sanctuary. It is currently undergoing fine tuning to better serve the needs of the long-exploited chimpanzees. At the orientation we were briefed on chimp etiquette, behavior and safety protocols. We were cautioned never to

touch or get close enough to be grabbed by a chimp, and were warned about a chimp's extraordinary speed, strength and smarts ("the three S's"). Examples of social and sensory enrichment activities were outlined.

A week later, Dr. Noon, a focused, no-nonsense woman who is constantly on the move, took time out of a busy morning to give my husband Bill and me our very first task as volunteers, assembling meal boxes of bananas, apples, pears, carrots and cucumbers for the chimps.

Each task had a specific purpose to improve the chimps' lives. Later we constructed foraging squares by riveting astroturf to sheets of thick plastic that would be smeared with peanut butter and jelly and hung from hooks as enrichment treats. Foraging squares are a type of food puzzle designed to provide captive chimps with opportunities to exercise their minds and relieve the boredom of confinement. The chimps spend time locating and extracting the food items from the foraging square, rather than just being issued a quantity of loose raisins, nuts, etc., which he can eat immediately with no mental challenge whatsoever. Other enrichment devices include flexible plastic tubes with raisins, marshmallows and peanut butter as a "sealant," as well as PVC pipes stuffed with sunflower seeds and cereal with screwed on ends and little holes so the chimps can get at the food inside. Additional volunteer tasks are tearing up sheets and blankets for the chimps to play with and sleep on, doing laundry and hosing down cages.

The staff was helpful, informative and pleasant. It

was clear their first priority is the physical and psychological well being of the chimpanzees. For example, they had noticed that the carts used to deliver meals were making some of the chimps anxious because they remembered being transported on them to the lab for experiments. Dr. Noon suggested the carts be hidden from these chimps, and a staff mem-



The foraging squares being constructed by this volunteer are made from squares of astroturf riveted to sheets of thick plastic which will be smeared with peanut butter and jelly before they are given to the chimpanzees as another enrichment treat.

ber offered to paint them a different color. This kind of attention to the nuances of their behavior is gradually transforming the chimps from anxious, untrusting lab animals and helping them feel more comfortable in their current living situation.

In the afternoon of that unseasonably warm February day, Bill and I slowly worked our way down a row of outdoor cages from opposite ends on the sunny south side of Building 300, also known as "the dungeon," greeting each chimpanzee. They basked in the sun while eating their lunches of fresh fruits, veggies, monkey chow and popcorn. The chimps on the north side of 300 aren't so fortunate. They get most

of their solar exposure indirectly from skylights that were installed soon after sanctuary director Dr. Carole Noon took the former Coulston Foundation biomedical research facilities over in September, 2002.

The personal histories of the chimpanzees are as varied as their faces. Doc had been housed for more than a decade a few cages from his mother, but hadn't been able to see her. Thoto was a former pet whose teeth were pulled who had been forced to gum the hard monkey chow by Coulston, but now eats bowls of soft food with a spoon. Jack was an ex-circus performer, and Karen an ASL translator. We observed lone chimps grooming themselves and making "raspberry" noises, as well as the few lucky enough to have cage mates with whom to interact with. A passing staff member

informed us that when Coulston ran the facility, the concrete cages were devoid of blankets, toys or enrichment devices to play with and occupy their minds. Now, thanks to Dr. Noon, her staff and donations from the public, the chimps enjoy many diversions.

That first day we brought items with which we hoped to entertain them: a yo-yo, dime store plastic musical instruments, a harmonica, balloons, an African thumb piano, a book. But the chimpanzees, not surprisingly, were more interested in the sun and the food than us. The spectrum of reactions to our efforts

ranged from silence to looks of mild curiosity to glottal clicks to full-blown pant-hoot displays. We wore old clothes because of the possibility of being pelted with feces or sprayed

chimp, and even a hula-hoop and skateboard in the cages. The world of these former lab chimps was clearly expanding. Their cages resembled the disordered playrooms

out manager for PETroglyphs (www.PETroglyphsNM.org), an award-winning New Mexico resource publication for animal lovers.

The spectrum of reactions to our efforts ranged from silence to looks of mild curiosity to glottal clicks to full-blown pant-hoot displays.

with spit or water. A few chimps wandered back and forth from the outside to their indoor cages. Four-foot-long mirrors attached to the fencing opposite their cages and dog dishes with mirrors glued to the inside bottom and hanging off the fronts of cages allowed them to examine themselves or observe what was happening down the row.

We saw large balls, hammocks, blankets, plastic toys, a stuffed baby

of children rather than stark jail cells. But it was also apparent that the enrichment and socialization process would work only with time, patience and perseverance. In sight was the day the gloomy ex-research facility that held so many bad memories for the chimps would be a part of their past. 🐾

Ardeth Baxter is an animal advocate, a freelance writer and the lay-

Double Your Help for the Chimps

An Arcus Foundation Challenge Grant will match any donation made through 2003. Donations may be sent to Ft. Pierce or made on-line. For more information on volunteering or donating supplies or money to the Center for Captive Chimpanzee Care, please contact the CCCC at 1300 LaVelle Road, Alamogordo, NM 88310 (505-437-8010) or at P.O. Box 12220, Fort Pierce, FL 34979 (772-429-0403). To learn more about the Center for Captive Chimpanzee Care, visit their Web site at www.savethechimps.org.