

N A M A S T E G L O B A L V I S I O N
1 9 9 8 : A T R I P T O C H I M F U N S H I

By Karla Boyd



Tess and Toni, photo by Doug Cress, Chimfunshi

When I arrive at Chimfunshi, it is dark, past sunset, the time when the chimps bed down. I briefly meet Dave and Shelia Siddle, founders and caretakers of Chimfunshi, a Zambian African orphanage for chimpanzees and other wildlife. They greet me and show me to my room so as not to awaken the sleeping world around us. The compound is quiet with chimps asleep. Expectancy however hugs the air. I retire but hardly sleep. I am alert for the sounds of Africa and I am hopeful. I am not disappointed. Morning comes early. Shrieking, hooting and panting awaken me. I have been transported into my long held dream. My hope becomes joy and I wake up smiling.

I arrive at the front porch early where two large cages serve as temporary home for ten baby chimps, five in each cage. Brown curled fingers and toes clasp cage bars. Inquiring faces peer out at me.

On the table is a basket that holds ten baby bottles. I am offered a bottle to feed the youngest chimp whose little mouth holds the nipple voraciously. Milk spills occasionally onto my hand. Shelia and her granddaughter as well as Dominic, one of the chimps' handlers, feed other curious, grateful, loving creatures who suck on the bottles like all greedy babies welcoming mother's milk. I feel an instant recognition and affection for these little lives whose grasping fingers are probing mine.

What makes Chimfunshi unique to wildlife sanctuaries is its inception. In 1983, Pal, a chimpanzee, his teeth smashed, malnourished, with his lips torn open was rescued from Zairian smugglers and delivered to Shelia and Dave by Shelia's son-in-law. Shelia and Dave, no strangers to farm and domestic animals, nurse Pal back to health. Shortly afterwards Liza arrives in need and receives the same necessary tender, loving care.

After a long period of care for Pal and a shorter time with Liza Do Little, a toddler, Shelia and Dave depart for an intended four-week trip to West Africa. Since Pal's arrival, he has been with the Siddles on a daily basis.

Shelia, not knowing how to help Pal make sense of their trip, repeatedly tells Pal that they will only be gone four weeks and then they will return to him. Pal and Liza stay at home under their daughter, Diana's, care. However, four weeks become five when their plane connections are delayed. They arrive in Lusaka met by friends who deliver the sad news that Pal is very, very ill. At their home, Diana meets her parents before they reach the front steps, and sobs, falling into her mother's arms. Inside their home, seeing Pal lying on the bed motionless, Shelia collapses to the floor and cries uncontrollably over what appears to be Pal's dead body. Pal remained well adjusted to their being away until they did not return after the promised four weeks. Then he became severely ill over the course of a few days.

WITH THEIR RETURN, BY SOME MYSTERIOUS GRACE, PAL RECOVERS

People bring four more chimps for the Siddles to rescue and heal. Glad for the time spent nursing the young ones back to life, Shelia and Dave decide that they are in need of chimp custodians and Shelia reaches out for help. They seek advice as to the best care for their chimps, with them or away. Upon learning about the Brewer Sanctuary, they feel the promise of this marvelous chimp shelter offering a future to their six chimps. Shelia and Dave take a trip to the Brewer's sanctuary near the River Gambia. They love the sanctuary and its founders. Both Dave and Shelia are glad-hearted that they found a place where the chimps could climb trees and play in the forests in safety. Sadly, though, Stella, one of the founders of Brewer's Sanctuary, lets Dave and Shelia know that they simply do not have room for six more chimps.

"Reluctantly, Dave and I returned home," Shelia tells me, "and face the bald truth, that we are our chimp's keepers". Shelia and Dave, grandparents with a dream of retiring, comprehend that their parenting days are far from over. "In a moment of resignation," Dave says, "we understood that somehow it was up to us to create the sanctuary and refuge for Pal, Liza and the others."

Word gets out, poaching does not stop and the Chimfunshi Sanctuary continues to grow. By holding the babies and nursing them to health, the Siddles open up a whole new chapter in the human-animal bond story. They also invent ("common sense," says Shelia) a means to introduce rescued individual chimps into the making of creative family systems. Seasoned primatologists assure them it will not work. Chimp troops or families can keep peaceful relationships in their own families, they tell the Siddles, but that is not extended to outside chimps who encroach on their space. Primatologists are convinced that you cannot create families out of non-family members.

But the Siddles prove differently and a major breakthrough in the rescuing of chimpanzees is generated. As of this writing in 1998, they have divided their seventy chimpanzees into several ad-hoc families, generating fourteen births since 1991 that let the family members swell. For weeks and months before putting chimps into working colonies, they learn about the personality traits of their orphaned charges and then introduce them to other chimps who might become family. Their careful exploration leads to great success. Orphaned and abused chimpanzees come from as far away as Russia, New Zealand, and, of course, as close as the continent of Africa. They all are welcomed and find a place to be respected and supported in as natural an environment as possible. Family systems do thrive even in the wake of the many injuries and losses that many of the chimps suffered, subjected as they were to cruel and harmful conditions before their arrival to Chimfunshi.

DELICIOUS IS THE ONLY WORD TO DESCRIBE MY EXPERIENCE AT CHIMFUNSHI

I spend my mornings walking a short mile out into the African bush with one or two of the chimp handlers and five baby chimps. Nothing can describe the intimacy of a baby chimp straddling my shoulders, their two strong, weathered hands clutching mine as I walk with them through the bush. They are in moments quiet and curious as they pat my face or let their hands wave in the air or jump down to see if they spied a fig or a cherry, two of their favorite foods. Their joyful hooting and panting as they sit atop my shoulders in more boisterous moments will continue to echo in my brain for years to come.

After walks and chimp forages for berries and food, we find a wonderful shady spot under a grove of trees, near the Kafue River. In playfulness, Sampie, one of the older baby chimps, absconds with my camera in a split second of my inattention. Amid hoots and shrieks, Dominic chases Sampie as he haughtily climbs a tree. Sampie threatens to crash my camera to the ground. The camera shakes violently in the open air. Dominic warns him in a language that only a chimpanzee can understand. For a split second, Sampie considers the situation and just before he is out of range, Dominic himself leaps up onto a tree branch and grabs my camera. Sampie, mad, retreats to the highest tree limbs sulking—or perhaps plotting his next heist.

Later, the next evening, dinner sits uncooked on an unlit stove. It has been quite a day. It begins with the Siddles telling me over breakfast of their intentions to move the five colonies of chimps into even larger cages and spaces where they will learn to cohabitate. The next stage following that, learning and success will eventuate in their release into the celebrated 2500-acre wildlife sanctuary that is slowly coming to life to fulfill their dreams.

Later in the morning, this process of relocation is underway. Ten baby chimps are moved into two larger enclosures. They are making ready to become acquainted with one another and explore the new possible families that are forming. Some of the chimp handlers from the village are clearing the area outside the cages, making room for construction for a courtyard area. The chimps will then have access from their enclosures to an outside area where they get to adjust to living more naturally outside in the African bush, this time though, protected from poachers.

This is a bold new step for the chimps who, for months, have lived in sanctuary on the Siddles front porch. Having slept in their baby-friendly enclosures where morning greeted them with warm milk, the chimps are being weaned away from that comfort and introduced into a more independent and interdependent chimp life. Here in their new environment they will learn to relate with the older chimps in compounds not far away. While old bonds will be farther away, new ones will form, often with the older adolescents looking out for the younger ones.

While the chimp babies are exploring their new situation, one of the workers accidentally drops a huge rusty iron slab that loudly smacks the ground in earsplitting reverberation. Within seconds, several workers run in a frantic daze, zigzagging around the compound with hands over their faces. Interested, curious on-lookers peer from behind caged bars. Momentarily, there is an eerie quiet. One of the men tells me to walk quietly away from the compound and all will be well. I do walk away in confidence holding fast to his promise that all is well.

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My confidence shatters however when a shower of bees storm the afternoon in furious buzzing ridicule. They emerge now as one field of energy. Shelia and I make a run for the front porch of her home, as do the workers. Momentarily regrouped, she, the handlers and I dash off to the compound to rescue the baby chimps and the adolescents unprotected now in their cages. Getting the cage doors open amidst the swarming bees is no easy task. The handlers carry out several chimps. Shelia sends me back to the porch while she and one of the handlers struggle to open one of the cage locks. Shelia is afraid that the bigger chimps still could hurt me in the chaos. I wait in anticipation and speak soothingly to the few rescued babies back now in their safe place on the porch. From afar, I can hear Shelia screaming to get the babies, get the babies. I can hear the loud laments of the chimps, screaming in pain.

Shelia returns back to the porch with two chimps in her arms, one whose face is badly swollen. Shelia's head now also billows out, almost twice its size. Shelia goes into her house to get Epinephrine while handlers hold howling chimps. I quietly go past the screaming bees to my room, get my vial of 1 M Apis Mellifica, a strong dose of the homeopath remedy for bee stings that I brought from home. After the tempest of bees has quieted, I go first to Shelia, then to the workers and chimps offering to all alike homeopath pellets to put under their tongues. As I offer the healing remedy to the last of the workers, one large furious African bee lunges at me, stinging me in triumph. One of the babies, Louise, is stung so badly that she looks almost like a limp doll in Shelia's arms. Her face is pale ashen gray. Neither Shelia nor I are sure she will live. It is morning before she shows genuine signs of revival.

The workers stay into the evening today, smoking out the bees as the sun goes down. As we watch the last few workers take their leave from the porch, Shelia notices a shadow figure darting between the trees. She alerts Dave that one of the older chimps is loose. She urges me to quickly come inside their home. She tells the handlers to call the others back for this new search. They walk out into the dusky thickness of forest, leaving only their shadows behind them.

There are dangers present when the larger chimps break out of their compounds and are on the run. Chimps think like children and yet are oblivious to their own native strength. They are stronger than adult men by the time they are six years of age. Chimps, who are cuddly and playful as infants, craving contact with most visiting guests, when older are not often receptive to strangers occupying their territory. On the loose, the adult chimps might break into the Siddle's home looking for food or comfort. If they wander into a stranger's bedroom, they might get upset finding only a foreigner present. Especially when they were seeking a warm, playful reception from a family member, full of the reassurance that they were accustomed to getting.

Now with the sudden turn of events and our furtive escapee spied, Shelia, Dave, and I laugh. Shelia's face is less swollen. Louise's complexion is less pale than only an hour ago. Still, dinner this night will have to wait. Dave and Shelia are not too worried that the inmate chimp will wander far into the African night. "Nevertheless, it is always best to know which chimp is loose to predict the escapee's plans and come up with the best strategy for capture," Dave tells me. Despite the Siddles best efforts and finest of fences and compounds, chimps routinely outsmart them and breakouts are not such an unusual affair. "Best to lure them back to their

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compound before too late.” Shelia seems about ready to tell me another story, I think, when she looks down to the floor. “The hopeful news”, Dave notes, “is that more often than not, we’re the home that our scoundrel runaways are running away to.” Are they missing their early years as infants when cradled and snuggled? Perhaps. I am told however that they are generally on the prowl, ready to raid the inside fridge where the good stuff is.

Preparing to go back onto the grounds to join the search, Shelia momentarily excuses herself, going through the kitchen to her bedroom in the back part of their house. Within minutes she re-emerges, screaming loudly with hands raised up in the air. “Rita,” Shelia openly exclaims, “has huge protruding ruby red lips that she noisily smacked when I entered her bedroom. Red lipstick is smeared all over her face, her cheeks and even on her new baby. Ohh!” Rita is one of the early chimp arrivals to the Chimfunshi. In 1997 she gave birth to a baby, Renate. It seems Rita broadcasted her crimson grin as she signaled Shelia’s attention in for a closer view. “Rita,” Shelia whines, “was hovering over my dresser with a bottle tightly clasped in her free hand. Do you know, Dave, what she had? Oh, what she had! She reeks of Channel #9. She is dripping wet in my best perfume. Can you imagine!” Dave brought her prize bottle from England, years ago. Shelia has, until this moment, savored every precious drop.

Shelia entreats Dave to have a few words with her rival and their latest escapee hunkered down in the bedroom. Dave winks at me and stifles a laugh at Shelia’s flushed face as she bemoans the loss of her perfume. Soon enough, Dave takes his leave and goes in for the rescue. Rita regards Dave as her most important beau. Dave’s plan is to fetch Rita, greeting and soothing her. After a bit, he returns to report the “lovely hug” he had with Rita all prettied up just for him, baby nearly smothered by their embrace. Dave’s scheme to keep her happy in the bedroom while Shelia gets the handlers is foiled. Rita, wise and too quick for such ploys, bids Dave a fond farewell with her hand as she crawls out the bedroom window and disappears into the now dark jungle night.

With the turn of events and Rita again on the run, I am hastily escorted to my room, about a minute away from the main house. I am locked inside my room. There I am protected from Rita’s curiosity to have a closer look at the newcomer in her turf. I wash my face and peer out my bedroom window to dark trees and sky. I close the drapes. I lie down and await the sun’s arrival when once again a search and rescue party will rekindle their efforts. Until summoned post rescue, I am house bound. In the early morning hours, I go to my tearoom window. To my astonished delight, I spy our large lumbering friend peering into the cages of another chimp family not ten yards away. They yowl, shriek, hoot and scream at their intruder. Their sounds are deafening in the early morning silence. The birds in aviary scream back from afar along with a few of the monkeys and baboons. Rita dashes off again, baby still drawn up close to her breast. Rita has a grin on her face as she looks behind her, perhaps to glimpse who might be following her. This is not her first escape. Does she enjoy this game of chase? Not an hour later, Rita and child are delivered once again to the safety of their compound. I give thanks to our vocal chimps still howling their protest.

I forge tentative bonds with the older chimps, who after all have better things to do with their time than to make conversation with a guest staying only a couple of weeks. I love, of course, all the babies and we have many hours together of tenderness, cuddles and boisterous play. The flying Wallendas have nothing on the flying baby tree-jumping chimps and my neck is testimony to this fact.

NEARING THE END OF MY JOURNEY

As I hold Louise, the youngest baby chimp, now pink faced and healthy, Shelia summons me on their radiophone back to the house. My flight plans have suddenly changed, Shelia tells me. The airline I had booked from the states is no longer in business and I need to come quickly to find an alternate means back to Johannesburg. Louise, the most clinging of the chimps, shrieks and yelps when I place her on the ground. Inconsolable, she grabs my ankles as I walk and drags on the ground whenever I attempt a step. When that does not work and she sees Bernard coming toward her, she jumps up and then throws herself down on the ground and sobs. She beats her fists as a small child. She kicks her feet. Of course, my heart breaks. She is again abandoned. This time by me. Still, Louise forgives easily it seems and a couple of days later she comes to me and sits on my lap. We are on one of our last walks before I take my leave. She seems to know this and moves in and out of connection with me. Down by the river, we play and snuggle amidst the antics of the older ones.

Baby Roxie remains aloof and off to herself throughout most of our forages into the tropical forest wilds. After witnessing the horror of her mother's death, shot down by poachers, Roxie seems to face her fate and now survival by walling off affection. I am told that even with Shelia or Dave, there is scant opportunity for Roxie letting down her guard. I have a special tenderness for Roxie during my time there. I talk to her and tickle her only modestly amid the chatter of the others demanding my attention. On my last morning at Chimfunshi, Roxie climbs into my lap and surrenders her long held armor in a sigh of release. I hold her a long, long time while she takes a deep penetrating nap. My body sucks in her trust like a thirsty sponge. I feel my body cells alive, relaxed, soothed and spirited as they were always meant to be. I feel her body warm against mine and she and I merge into one. Bernard snaps a photo of us. Now Roxie will be able to find her way back to the others who will love her and make her feel safe. Dave, Shelia, Dominic and Bernard have been waiting for such a moment. Lying on the ground under warm African skies two other baby chimps nuzzle me. Despite the fact of my leaving, I know I have come home.



Karla, photo by Doug Cress, Chimfunshi

2000 TRAVEL LOG UPDATE

Seventy orphaned chimps have found sanctuary with the Siddles. The Chimfunshi Wildlife Orphanage has grown to be the largest chimpanzee sanctuary in the world. On April 14, 1999, fifty orphaned chimps were released into two 500-acre sanctuaries, a fraction of the 2,500 acre envisioned sanctuary in a 10,000 acre nature reserve, equipped with an Education Center and Visitor's Lodge as part of the plan and dream.

Among the fifty chimps released was Ludmilla. Jane Goodall brought Ludmilla to the Siddles in 1990. Milla, as she was nicknamed, was kept captive in a bar in Tanzania and developed a crippling addiction to alcohol and cigarettes that was encouraged by the bar's patrons who laughed at her as she smoke and drank. Milla had not seen a chimp in decades and was the oldest member to arrive at the Chimfunshi sanctuary. Her rehabilitation was a difficult one and thirty years had passed since she had last been in the jungle of central Africa.

The Chimfunshi Wildlife Orphanage's 17 year battle to rescue and rehabilitate chimpanzees was honored by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which named the sanctuary to its Global 500 Roll of Honor for the Year 2000!

Only 50 years ago, there were probably more than a million chimps. Now only 150,000 are thought to remain. Join us in this bold endeavor to support these beautiful furry "cousins" (chimps and humans share 98.6 percent of their DNA) to their return to the wilds through the Chimfunshi Wildlife Orphanage.

Namaste Global Vision, on behalf of Chimfunshi, is seeking to help raise funds for more space to help that number grow and to enhance Chimfunshi educational center. If you wish to send financial contributions, please send them to:

**Chimfunshi-USA,
PO Box 5873
Boston, Ma 02114**

Or payments can be made via on-line payment at www.chimfunshi.org.za.

If you want to know more about Chimfunshi, please visit their website. www.chimfunshi.org.za.

Because the scarcity story still has a grip on human conditioning, we could not find a better time to collectively be at stake for creating a new future where there is enough for us all, where there are enough resources to sustain us all. It just might be that our human-animal bonding is one of the best routes to forming that future. We are at the apex of the human-animal bond opportunity. Shelia Siddle with humor and knowing describes this bond in her book: *In My Family Tree: A Life with Chimpanzees*, co-authored by Doug Cress, a journalist who lives in Portland, Oregon and who is the ED of Pasa Primates.

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The human-animal bond story almost always includes at its beginning humans in surrender to something higher and more elegant than they could imagine for their lives. It is a journey of love, adventure and daring. If you want to start an animal shelter or sanctuary or work in one, this book is a treasure. Very few books so colorfully and beautifully capture the essence of vision, passion, stewardship and commitment that foretells of a job well done.

Many awards have honored Chimfunshi Wildlife Orphanage. The Queen of England, for their work in supporting African wildlife, has honored Shelia and Dave Siddle as members of the British Empire as well.

If you want to underwrite or contribute to Namaste Global Vision's Chimfunshi Documentary Project, please email us at info@namasteglobalvision.org. We are eager to get new footage with Shelia Siddle, a robust senior, who still over-looks the Chimfunshi Organization with her daughter in constant care of the chimps and the organization's operations.

Currently Chimfunshi has 119 Chimpanzees in residence.



Shelia and baby chimp , photo by Doug Cress, Chimfunshi