

# Haven Can't Wait

**After decades in laboratories,  
former research subjects rediscover  
what it means to be a chimpanzee**

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**J**ulius, Phyllis, Sandy, and Jessica may not realize it yet, but they recently completed the last leg of a long journey.

Captured in the African rain forest more than 40 years ago, the graying, arthritic apes have spent the bulk of their lives in U.S. laboratories. Now at the national chimpanzee sanctuary in Louisiana, the elderly foursome spend much of their days quietly grooming each other in a spacious play yard. They're a bit reserved. Still tentative about their new surroundings. But when mealtimes come, they seem to grasp that their lives have taken a dramatic turn for the better.

"The best thing in the world is getting to feed them for the first time," says Chimp Haven animal care specialist Adrienne Mrsny. "... They are just so excited to see a cucumber and a tomato, and they're all food barking at each other, hugging each other, and crying with joy."

Six months from now, staff predict, Julius and his group will be even happier, but less humble and more entitled. Plain popcorn won't cut it anymore; they'll want it topped with Cajun seasoning.

Personalities will emerge. Staff will learn who prefers kale over romaine. Who enjoys action movies and who would rather see a nature documentary. Who wants to bivouac in the woods instead of snuggling in a hammock inside a skylighted bedroom.

"We kind of spoil them," admits behaviorist Amy Fultz.

Outwardly, the animals will change as well. Exercise will improve their muscle mass and sunbathing will darken their pale faces. Scraggly coats will become thick and glossy.

"A year later you're not dealing with the same chimp who came here," says caregiver Diane LaBarbera.

Over the years, Chimp Haven has been the scene of many amazing transformations. The once morbidly obese Puddin' spent a decade alone in a cage at a research facility. For his remaining five years, Puddin' lived in a group of 19 chimps. "He walked the habitat every day, all the way around the multi-acre perimeter," says animal care director Kathleen Taylor. "He was constantly out there walking, and he lost an amazing amount of weight. He was just so happy."

And there's Doc, whom Taylor knew when she worked at a New York research facility in the mid-1990s. "Doc looks 10 years younger now."

These are the results Fultz and Chimp Haven board member Linda Brent dreamed of when they first envisioned a place where chimpanzees used in research could spend their final years. In Fultz's mind, it's always been a matter of doing what's right. "They have served us, they didn't have a choice about that, and we do owe them our thanks and a wonderful retirement."



Caught in the wild as an infant, 49-year-old Penny spent decades in a lab before retiring to Chimp Haven in 2011. Recent years have brought great strides in the campaign to end invasive experiments on these highly intelligent, emotionally complex animals.

## OPPOSABLE THUMBS UP

For Julius' quartet and five other chimps, retirement began the morning of Jan. 22, when they left the New Iberia Research Center in southern Louisiana and traveled 220 miles north to Chimp Haven. As they rolled up to the rural property in Keithville, staff members lined the gravel driveway, clapping and cheering. The moment marked the first wave of what could be the largest group of government-owned chimpanzees ever to be retired from a laboratory.

Julius' journey began 53 years ago, when he was trapped as an infant in Africa. Now nearing the end of a captive chimpanzee's expected lifespan, the gentle-natured ape would likely have ended his days at the New Iberia Research Center, where a 2008 HSUS undercover investigation revealed traumatized chimps living alone in barren cages, others gang-housed in overcrowded enclosures, and rough handling and medical treatment protocols that kept the animals in constant fear.

But the past two decades have brought increasing momentum to the campaign to end invasive research on chimpanzees

(see timeline). Most recently, a 2011 Institute of Medicine study concluded that chimpanzees are largely unnecessary for biomedical and behavioral research, leading to what bioethicist and study committee chair Jeffrey Kahn describes as the strongest restrictions to date on the use of any animal species for research in the U.S. With urging from The HSUS and Chimp Haven, the National Institutes of Health, which commissioned the study, eventually agreed to sanctuary all 111 government-owned chimps at New Iberia—if enough funds can be raised to expand sanctuary capacity.

Standing before a forested area where Julius and his friends will eventually roam, Kathleen Conlee tries to hold back tears. "It's been a long road," says the HSUS vice president of animal research issues. "Working in animal research issues, you prevent additional research often, but you don't actually physically see animals get out to a place like this."

It's not just the habitats that make Chimp Haven special. The sanctuary's unofficial motto is "we're here to serve them." This means gaining the animals'

trust and training them to present body parts so that handling and medical procedures are as stress-free as possible. "I've worked in other facilities where the vet is viewed [by the animals] as this negative entity," says veterinarian Raven Jackson. "These guys see me and they come running."

It means recruiting a facial surgeon to operate on Jerry, who arrived from a lab in 2011 with mouth tumors that made eating difficult. And researching options for Tika, who was infected with multiple strains of HIV and is now being treated with antiretroviral medications.

Serving the chimps also means placing them in groups where they can form friendships, groom each other, and establish hierarchies. And it involves enabling species-typical behaviors like climbing, nest building, and play.

Even the lab-born chimps have taken to these activities with gusto, learning from their wild-born friends. In the forested habitats, they use sticks to extract honey and raisins from man-made "termite mounds." Scattered seeds and other goodies encourage the foraging that occupies much

## The Road to Sanctuary

Harmful research on human's closest living genetic relative has been controversial since its beginnings in the U.S. in the 1920s. By the 1990s, with the realization that great apes are poor models for studying diseases such as AIDS, researchers were joining advocates in asking what to do with all the "surplus" chimps. Behind the scenes and before Congress, The HSUS has been working to influence the course of this conversation.



**1995:** A decade after a government-sponsored breeding boom, the National Institutes of Health places a moratorium on breeding government-owned chimps.

**1997:** The National Research Council states that it would be unethical to euthanize surplus research chimps and recommends the creation of sanctuaries.

New York University's Laboratory for Experimental Medicine and Surgery in Primates closes.

Holloman Air Force Base in New Mexico divests itself of its chimpanzee colony, first established in the 1950s.

**2000:** The Chimpanzee Health Improvement, Maintenance, and Protection Act establishes a plan for long-term care of surplus research chimps.

In New Mexico, the NIH takes ownership of nearly 300 chimps at the notorious Coulston Foundation and transfers them to the Alamogordo Primate Facility.

**2002:** The Coulston Foundation loses NIH funding and goes out of business; Save the Chimps sanctuary rescues the remaining chimps.

**2005:** Chimp Haven, chosen by the NIH to be the national chimpanzee sanctuary, welcomes its first residents, Rita and Teresa.

**2007:** The moratorium on breeding government-owned chimps is made permanent following HSUS-led pressure from the public.

The Chimp Haven Is Home Act closes a loophole that would have allowed federally owned retired chimps to be called back into research.

**2008:** Pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline ends the use of chimpanzees.

**2009:** The USDA investigates the New Iberia Research Center (shown at left) following an HSUS undercover exposé.

**2010:** Animal protection groups mount opposition to the planned transfer of 200 chimps from a New Mexico warehousing facility to a Texas lab. After 14 are transferred, the NIH postpones the plan.

of a wild chimp's life.

Chimps who lived for decades in steel and concrete cages with no bedding now indulge their nest-building instincts to their fullest. Some weave yaupon holly branches and leaves into a circle, piling pine needles in the middle. Others, like 55-year-old Karen, prefer man-made comforts. Each night, the balding matriarch with a wizened, Yoda-like face arranges a pile of blankets about her and carefully tucks herself into bed. "If it's not quite right, she'll sit back up and retuck and rearrange and then try it out again," Fultz says.

Since no captive setting can completely replicate life in the wild, the sanctuary has an activity calendar rivaling that of any senior center: watercolor painting, movies, and treat-filled toys that challenge the apes' problem-solving abilities. Belly dancers, puppeteers, and drummers perform for the chimps (who, when it comes to moving to the music, "have rhythm but no beat," says enrichment technician Erin Loeser).

Most of all, the animals are surrounded by people who adore them and feel privileged to provide them the best possible life. "After working with chimps," says Jackson, "nothing really compares."

### CHIMPS IN LIMBO

If there's a downside to working at Chimp Haven, it's this: With a geriatric population, death is a sadly regular occurrence. "It's like losing a friend," says LaBarbera. "The only way we can deal with it is [to remember] that they got to be here, even if it was for a short time."

**2011:** An HSUS petition alleges government fraud by New Iberia for unlawfully breeding chimps.

The Great Ape Protection and Cost Savings Act is reintroduced in Congress.

An NIH-commissioned Institute of Medicine study recommends strict criteria for chimpanzee use.

Idenix Pharmaceuticals adopts a policy against chimpanzee research.

**2012:** Bioqual in Maryland ends its invasive chimp research program, leaving only five laboratories with chimps in the U.S.

The NIH commits to send more than 100 government-owned New Iberia chimps to Chimp Haven after originally planning to send all but a few to a Texas lab.

**2013:** Gilead Sciences agrees not to use chimps in research.

An NIH working group recommends that all but 50 government-owned research chimps be sent to sanctuary and that the rest be kept in ethologically appropriate environments.

The transfer of government-owned chimps from New Iberia to Chimp Haven begins.



Toys filled with frozen treats keep Jeff (top left) and Jessika (top right) happily occupied. Magnum (below) shows why Chimp Haven's medical suite is equipped with an ultrasonic teeth cleaner: The chimps like to store biscuits in their mouths.



HSUS-sponsored Ladybird, Penny, Jerry, and Karen—shown here in a Chimp Haven play yard—came to the sanctuary in 2011. They now live with Julius' group, forming new friendships and hierarchies.

The true tragedies are the animals who never made it to sanctuary. Like Sterling, who was born in a lab, ripped away from his mother at birth, infected with hepatitis C, and used in hundreds of blood draws, countless liver biopsies, and other procedures that required him to be anesthetized monthly. Not surprisingly, the depressed animal mutilated his hands, face, and belly. He died at New Iberia in August 2010, after a life marked by near constant suffering.

For Sterling and two chimps who died just months before they would have been transferred to Chimp Haven this year, the chance for sanctuary simply came too late.

With this reality in mind, every delay in moving these animals to sanctuary is agonizing for their advocates. Aside from the 100-plus New Iberia chimpanzees, approximately 350 government-owned chimps and 450 privately owned ones live in U.S. labs. While scientific opinion is shifting in favor of retiring the animals, and though only a fraction are still used in experiments, some researchers are pushing to keep them in labs. "I think of the chimpanzees in the same way that I think of a library," Texas laboratory director John VandeBerg told a reporter last year. "There are many books in the library that will never be used this year or next year. Many of them might never be used again. But we don't know which ones will be needed tomorrow ... or the year after."

For the government-owned chimps, including the ones still at New Iberia, another roadblock is funding. Under current federal law, the government pays 75 percent of the daily care costs for its retired research chimps and 90 percent of habitat construction costs. (Private donations cover the rest.) But the law limited government expenditures to a cumulative \$30 million—a number that's nearly been reached after 13 years.

The HSUS is urging Congress to authorize funds to expand sanctuary capacity. Since it's more expensive to keep chimps in labs, moving them to sanctuaries would save taxpayers tens of millions of dollars



□ ON THE iPad:  
Watch a video  
and slideshow of Chimp  
Haven's new residents.

over the animals' lifetimes.

Nevertheless, getting the government to fund new habitats could take time that many chimps don't have. For this reason, The HSUS, other animal welfare organizations, and individuals have donated money to jumpstart construction at Chimp Haven. But millions more will be needed to get all the chimps to sanctuary.

#### PLANET OF RETIRED APES

While these politics play out, Chimp Haven's caregivers keep busy with the immediate business at hand. On an early morning in February, buckets are rapidly

filling with sweet potatoes, purple cabbages, red apples, and bananas. Dayshift crew members pull on rubber boots and don scrubs in preparation for cleaning detail, and a worker gathers Kong toys filled with frozen fruit and sugar-free pudding. In the medical suite, Connie has just undergone her annual physical. She lies sedated, belly up, hairy limbs stretched end to end on the exam table.

Outside, 135 chimpanzees greet the day according to mood and preference. Those not partial to the cool weather hang out inside communal bedrooms or quietly groom each other in sheltered corners of



their play yards. Others scamper across the metal chutes that act as overhead walkways, vaulting up 20-foot tall jungle gyms and across hammocks fashioned from donated fire hoses. Quiet stretches are interrupted by low, breathy whoop-whoop-whoops—called pant hoots—that build to excited screeches.

In one play yard, Cody pushes a plastic barrel around the perimeter like a hyperactive toddler with a shopping cart. In the distance, Henry, the neighborhood busybody, sways in a pine tree high above Habitat 2. And in a few hours, Julius and his group will be released to a play yard, where

for the first time in more than four decades, they will look up at a sky without bars.

The humans will spend much of the day cleaning, feeding, and doing seemingly endless loads of laundry. But they walk with a sense of purpose and excitement, their walkie-talkies crackling.

“Each day has new surprises,” says LaBarbera. “I kind of look at it as a game of ‘Are you smarter than a chimpanzee?’ And some days we win, and some days they win.”

Asked why the chimpanzees inspire such devotion, their caregivers rattle off a list of attributes: their intelligence, their sense of humor, even the cunning and ability to deceive that keep staff members on their toes.

And there’s the undeniable “humaneness” of them—the feeling, as primatologist Geza Teleki once wrote, of seeing “my species inside the skin of another.” They’re highly political but devoted to their friends. Males develop crushes on females, who typically don’t reciprocate. Many chimps lavish attention on a beloved stuffed animal or doll—what scientists call “attachment objects” but staff refer to as “their babies.” The chimps who know sign language may ask for your boots or comment on your new haircut.

But what’s truly awe inspiring, their caregivers say, is the animals’ resilience and ability to forgive.

### EVOLVING TIMES

One prime example of this resilience resides in a habitat with a wedge of forest bordered by a moat. Twenty years ago, Jo Jo lived alone in a suspended cage in the New York lab where Taylor worked as a caretaker. “After the day settled down, I would go in there and just spend some time with him. He just didn’t want you to leave. He just craved a relationship. ... I could give him an enrichment item, and he’d just give it back. Whatever he had in his cage, it could be a piece of paper, it could be hardened feces—he craved that strong relationship so much, he’d give you anything he had.” Today, Jo Jo is a good-natured, people-oriented chimp who can often be seen grooming his best friend, Murphy.

While laboratory conditions have im-

proved over the years, federal law still allows chimps to be kept alone in 5-by-5-by-7 foot cages. And many of Chimp Haven’s elders experienced lab life when there were no regulations governing their care and housing. For some, recovering from past trauma takes time. They may show abnormal rocking behaviors typical of infant chimps deprived of their mothers. Many new arrivals are afraid of grass. Others are wall-walkers, fearful of open spaces. A few display obsessive-compulsive behaviors, such as picking at their skin.

With patience and gentle training, staff members help these animals gradually heal. They know, for example, that when Chaka starts screaming and hitting himself, as if experiencing a terrifying flashback, playing Native American *Spirit Journey* on the CD player will calm him down. “The first few notes start, and he just centers and focuses on the music,” says Mrsny. “The other chimps in his group come over and comfort him.”

No matter what chimps in labs have been through, Conlee says, “they do rehabilitate, and they deserve the chance to do so.”

Today, their chances have never been more hopeful. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is considering a petition by The HSUS and other groups to list all chimpanzees as endangered, which could greatly limit their use in biomedical research, entertainment, and the pet trade. Three biomedical research facilities recently ended their use of chimps. Several pharmaceutical companies have agreed to no longer use chimpanzees. And early this year, an NIH working group recommended that most government-owned chimps be sent to sanctuary and that the remainder be kept in more ethologically appropriate settings.

Meanwhile, two other groups from New Iberia have followed Julius’ path to Chimp Haven, where the chimpanzee champions are rolling up their sleeves, preparing for an unprecedented number of new arrivals—and hoping that, as events unfold, all chimps in laboratories will soon be in sanctuary. ■

▶ **LEARN HOW** you can help more chimps get to sanctuary at [humanesociety.org/NewIberiaChimps](http://humanesociety.org/NewIberiaChimps).