

Monkey Business at the Austin Zoo

06.25.19 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD



Update: Previously published versions of the blog identified the zoo director as “Patti Cook.” The correct name for the zoo director is “Patti Clark.” HT @change4ATXZoo.

First, there was [Monkey Gets Day in Court](#) (July 2018). Then, it was [Gorillas, Guerrillas, and 501\(c\)\(3\)s](#) (March 14, 2019).

Was this the beginning of a new series for our blog; a “primates & philanthropy” theme? In concluding the March 14th post, we wrote that we’ll “scan the internet for [\[more\] intriguing and relevant stories](#) about gorillas and guerrillas.”

A new item popped up that same morning that seemed to fit the bill. But, unlike the lighthearted tone of the first two posts, this one is no laughing matter. It’s a serious and disturbing tale of alleged mistreatment of monkeys and other suffering animals at a nonprofit rescue facility in Texas.

There are lessons to be learned from this all-too-familiar situation: a 501(c)(3) controlled by a charismatic leader who mismanages the organization into a crisis. There are new – hopeful – elements as well: employee-whistleblowers challenging leadership, the city press investigating and publicizing their claims, and the public responding with outrage and demands for action.

The Zoo: History

There is no traditional, accredited, zoo in Austin, Texas; [unusual for a city of that size](#). The facility called the [Austin Zoo](#) is a private “sanctuary” for some 300 “rescued and abandoned animals.”

This refuge, popular with visitors from around the world, was created in 1990 on land that was formerly a goat farm. By about 2000, the organization running it was granted 501(c)(3) status. It relies on private donations, admission fees, grants, and sponsorships but no [government funding](#). There are about 35 employees, the majority of whom are zookeepers: required to hold bachelor’s degrees and have two years of animal-care experience, they are [paid just \\$10 an hour](#).

By about 2007, the Austin Zoo was floundering and out of money. Along came 61-year-old Patti Clark, a retired teacher and paralegal, and widow of a prominent state court judge. She volunteered to take charge, full-time, and without pay. Under her leadership – she had assumed the jobs of executive director as well as board president – the organization **came back strong**, accumulating some \$600,000 in revenue. In addition to Ms. Clark, there were three more board members.

The Zoo: Tensions Brew

Brewing just under the surface, though, there were considerable problems and tensions arising in significant part from Ms. Clark's allegedly heavy handed governing style, inattention to deteriorating conditions at the facility, and unorthodox ideas about animal care that she was in a position to impose. In particular, she opposed euthanizing terminally ill animals in extreme distress and ordered staff to rely on unproved homeopathic remedies. These policies are expressly contrary to the standard of care and best practices of veterinarians and the premier zoological accrediting association in the United States.

By the spring of 2018, some of the zookeepers had become so alarmed and distressed by the pain and suffering of many animals under their care that they banded together to demand that conditions and policies change. What got the ball rolling was their 54-page letter to the board of directors presenting facts and evidence of what they claimed were intolerable animal mistreatment and suffering. Concerned about retaliation, these employees submitted the letter unsigned at first but with a promise to reveal themselves if there were assurances of good faith and protection by leadership.

A significant feature of this initial letter was the zookeepers' presentation of proposed solutions including the removal of Ms. Clark from either of her two positions: executive director or head of the board. Apparently, they wanted her gone entirely but didn't believe the board would go along with that point.

What followed for the remainder of 2018 was a defensive response by Ms. Clark and the board including some retaliation against those employees known or suspected to be ringleaders of the opposition. There was a so-called investigation that was largely an insider-led coverup and denial. The board took the side of Ms. Clark – still executive director as well as board leader – but acknowledged that some changes were in order. The small amount of action, though, was insufficient to mollify the concerns of the zookeeper opposition.

Media Exposes Zoo Issues

Austin's newspaper, the American-Statesman, launched a comprehensive investigation of the Austin Zoo dispute, including interviews of some 25 or so current and former employees. In late January, it published a 26-page article written by reporter Elizabeth Findell: *Turmoil at the Austin Zoo: Documenting a Zookeepers' Revolt*. This piece includes detailed background information as well as the events, arguments, and responses in the dispute unfolding until the date of publication. It's a compelling read, opening with this sentence: "For one zookeeper, a long-suffering monkey's death launched a revolt."

This expose sparked outrage by readers and created a groundswell of public support for the zookeepers. They continued their protest in a more-high profile way including a Change.Org petition demanding changes at the Austin Zoo including reining in the power of Patti Clark.

Through early March, 2019, pressure intensified on the Austin Zoo leadership. The organization announced that Ms. Clark would relinquish her duties as board president but would continue as executive director and be a non-voting member of the board. The four existing board members voted to add three more members. Opponents criticized the move as a stunt because the new board members were allies of Ms. Clark or vendors to the organization.

Opponents vowed to continue the fight, including holding a public vigil on a weekend in late March.

The Core Leadership Issue

In *The Consequences of Weak Inequality: A Zoo Story* (February 1, 2019), Marian Conway writes in The Nonprofit Quarterly about why it's a bad idea for the same person to hold the office of executive director and board chair. "NPQ has always opposed this practice, as do many other experts on nonprofit governance, and this situation is a clear illustration of the reasons why. Even if the CEO were not at all culpable for what is happening at the zoo, which, given her dual position is highly doubtful, the public is left with the impression that she may be blocking reasonable accountability."

Many experts believe it's a bad idea for the executive director to serve even as a voting member of the board – much less be the board chair.

Conclusion

In Marian Conway's follow-up article on March 14, 2019, she predicts rough seas ahead for the organization. The title says it all: *Austin Zoo Makes the Usual Missteps after a Fall from Grace: What Not to Do*. The purported leadership shuffle, which appears to put form over substance, is just one of the problems.