

Santa Clara Magazine Spring 2005

In this issue

- From the editor
- Letters
- Mission Matters
- Sports Roundup
- Hit the Books
- Campaign News
- SCU Alumni Association
- Class Notes
- Bronco Profiles
- Alumni Calendar
- Coming Attractions
- After Words

- Current Issue
- Issues Archive
- Web Exclusives
- Submitting Content
- About Santa Clara Magazine
- Contact Us

Spring 2005 > The Koko Connection



By Victoria Hendel De La O
Photos by Ron Cohn of The Gorilla Foundation

It's only noon, but senior Tierra Wilson is already having a very good day. Tierra works at The Gorilla Foundation and she has spent the morning preparing meals for two very special individuals, who also happen to be lowland gorillas. With afternoon approaching, Tierra is heading into her favorite part of the day, when she gets to spend time with Koko, arguably the world's most famous gorilla, and more importantly, one of Tierra's best friends.

With her small frame, light blonde hair, and unassuming demeanor, Tierra is an unlikely playmate and friend for a 330-pound gorilla. Be that as it may, the 21-year-old, who has been working with the foundation since last spring, wouldn't have it any other way.

A Change of Plans

Tierra has always wanted to help those in need. As a freshman, she began on the pre-med track and worked her way into an internship in the oncology department at O'Connor Hospital with every expectation that she would go on to medical school. But as she experienced what she calls "the true motivations and issues" within the healthcare industry, Tierra began to experience a change of heart. Then, one of her patients died.

"I couldn't keep going on as normal or even finish my finals. I just packed my things and headed home," she says. What followed was a time of reflection and maybe even a little desperation. "When I got back to school the next quarter, I knew I needed to find something quickly that would revive my interest in school," she explains. Cruising the Internet for internship possibilities, Tierra stumbled upon The Gorilla Foundation.

Co-founded by Ron Cohn and Francine "Penny" Patterson, a former adjunct professor at SCU, the foundation promotes the "protection, preservation, and propagation" of gorillas. One of the primary projects at the foundation involves teaching a modified form of American Sign Language to two gorillas—Koko and Michael (who passed away in 2000).

Tierra says she had been watching television programs about Koko since she was a child, and she had always admired Penny Patterson. When she realized that The Gorilla Foundation was located in Woodside, just 45 minutes from SCU, Tierra knew she had to make something happen.

"I sent about three résumés each week for two months. I also called them every few days. Finally, I got through to someone," she says. Because the foundation



Koko with Dr. Penny Patterson. Patterson and Koko met at the San Francisco Zoo in 1976 when Patterson was a graduate student. Within a year, she co-founded Project Koko and began teaching the gorilla American Sign Language.

Comment on this article

Send a comment on this article to the editor of Santa Clara Magazine.

The Maui Preserve



[larger format image]

The Gorilla Foundation is constructing a gorilla preserve in West Maui, Hawaii. The Maui Ape Preserve will establish a sanctuary on 70 acres of land that resembles the natural habitat of gorillas in Africa as closely as possible and fosters the development of natural family social groups. Patterson says she feels that the preserve "is a vital step toward saving the species from imminent extinction."

If you would like to learn more about the Maui Ape Preserve or find out how you can help, please visit www.koko.org or contact Lorraine Slater, development director, at lorraine@koko.org.

web exclusive

Read a Web-exclusive article in which Paul J. Fitzgerald, S.J., of SCU's Catholic Studies Program discusses the [theological status of animals as moral beings](#).

typically accepts only doctoral candidates for their program, Tierra had to convince them to grant her an interview. She told them that if they interviewed her, she would stop calling.

Tierra's efforts paid off and she was accepted as a volunteer. On only her second day, Tierra made first contact with someone she had wanted to meet for a very long time. Koko had spotted her from afar and was signing "Love you visit hurry." After getting clearance from Patterson, Tierra introduced herself to Koko and the pair immediately hit it off.

"Koko understands spoken English perfectly, but I didn't know much sign language when I started, so she had to be patient with me at first," she says. When Koko wanted to play chase and Tierra couldn't understand her signs, Koko would resort to charades, acting out the game of chase. "She'll dumb down her abilities to your level, which is a very humbling experience, but the more sign you know, the more she'll talk to you."

Part of the Team

After volunteering in the spring of 2004, Tierra became a more permanent member of the team when she was selected to be a paid research assistant and gorilla caregiver. Most mornings, this means preparing elaborate meals for Koko and Ndume, the foundation's male gorilla. Ndume gets peanut butter and tortillas for breakfast, while Koko prefers gourmet fruit and vegetable platters. "She probably eats healthier than I do," Tierra says. In the afternoons, she sets up activities for the gorillas and spends time with Koko, watching videos, playing games, and talking.

Tierra says that, despite Koko's size, she is remarkably gentle. "Koko likes very innocent activities. She loves playing with dolls and watching movies. She usually makes you watch the same movie over and over until she's tired of it. I think we watched 'Pretty Woman' 20 times," Tierra says.

Over time, Tierra found that she was talking more and more to Koko about her own life. "I tell her all kinds of things about myself, or even just about how my day's going. She really has become one of my best friends," she says.

At Koko's 33rd birthday party, Tierra even brought her own kitten, Araña, as a special treat so Koko could play. "Koko is between kittens right now, but she loves them. She just lit up when she saw Araña," Tierra says.

But like all friends, Koko and Tierra have their off days, too. One afternoon, after trying unsuccessfully to get Koko to go back into her house ("You can't make a 330-pound gorilla do anything she doesn't want to do," Tierra explains), Tierra enlisted Ron Cohn's help. Cohn, who is an authority figure to Koko, came out and insisted that Koko go inside. "She knew I had told on her and, as she was walking into her house, Koko turned around and signed to me that I was a 'toilet'," Tierra says.

Having grown up on a farm in Grass Valley, Calif., where she says there were "lambs running around the house in diapers," Tierra is no stranger to bonding with animals. (Her first name even means "earth" in Spanish.) Still, Tierra says that most days she is thrilled and surprised by what takes place at the foundation.

"I'm as much in awe of Penny as I am of the experience of working with Koko and Ndume. Each day I learn something new from all of them," she says.

In fact, Tierra thinks that most people could learn something from Koko. "She's so open with her feelings," Tierra explains. "Humans tend to taint everything as they get older and they have ulterior motives, but with gorillas, there is no clouding of emotions. If Koko loves you, you'll know it, and if she's sad, you'll know that, too."

Tierra says that Koko is very empathetic, as well. Once, after spraining her wrist, Tierra came to the foundation wearing a brace. Koko, who usually insists on having everything explained to her in detail, wanted to hear the story. "She made signs of 'hurt' and 'sad' and really cared about my pain," she says. "But that's typical of her."


Making Connections

Koko now knows more than 1,000 signs. She expresses her feelings and thoughts on almost any subject, including her own suffering. When Koko recently began complaining about pain in her tooth, Patterson gave Koko a chart with a scale from one to 10 so she could rate her discomfort. Eventually, Koko indicated that the pain was severe enough to warrant a surgical procedure. In fact, she asked for one.

Since it's potentially dangerous to put a gorilla under anesthesia, a team of doctors was brought in to take care of Koko's medical needs during the surgery. In addition to having her tooth pulled, Koko received a complete physical examination, presided over by 12 specialists.



Tierra with Araña, her kitten. Tierra knew of Koko's love for kittens, so she brought Araña for a special visit on Koko's birthday.



For Tierra, the surgery was packed with mixed emotions of both concern and scientific fascination. "It was a very stressful situation to see our friend in such a vulnerable state, but I got to hold her hand and comfort her during the surgery. I kissed her nose and gave her a big hug," she says.

Tierra is equally proud of the inroads she has made with Ndume, Koko's partner. "As a free-living silverback, he'd be protecting a whole group of gorillas, so he's naturally more suspicious of others. Each time he shows a little more trust toward me, I feel like it's a huge accomplishment," Tierra says. "Koko throws her affection around pretty willingly, but you have to really win Ndume over."

Beyond gorilla care, Tierra also works on the foundation's behalf with the Santa Clara Community Action Program (SCCAP), SCU's student volunteer organization. She and other members of SCCAP visit elementary schools and educate children about gorillas and their status as an endangered species. They also provide curricula to teachers so they can continue the conversation in the classroom.

"There is little room left for gorillas. They are being poached and eaten and they may be functionally extinct in as little as five years," Tierra says. "They won't make it in the long run unless there's a change in our mindset, and that means there needs to be awareness among our youth."

Tierra herself is a living testament to this philosophy, as well as to the foundation's commitment to educating and inspiring the next generation. "Working with Tierra and her friends from the university has helped to re-energize our project," Patterson says. "She brings fresh perspectives and boundless enthusiasm to everything she does. Everyone, from Koko to the folks in the business office, appreciates her talents and hard work. We consider ourselves extremely lucky to have such a dedicated group of individuals contributing their ambitious new ideas."

The Future

Tierra, who is a double major in combined sciences and studio art, shudders a bit when she thinks about graduating and making her way in what she calls the "real world." But she knows she has already been given an incredible gift by The Gorilla Foundation, as it has set her on a life path—a path that some might say is a calling. She hopes to keep working for the foundation for the next couple of years, possibly even going to Cameroon where the foundation funds educational programs to teach local people about the value of conserving wildlife.

The foundation also helped fund the creation of the Michael Sanctuary near Yaounde, Cameroon, which is currently home to 11 orphaned gorillas. And it is these orphans that seem to be the true inspiration behind Tierra's interest: "There are babies there," she says almost in a whisper, with a gleam in her eye.

Tierra would also like to apply her artistic talents to help illustrate a book being written about African legends. Proceeds from the book will go directly to helping the orphaned gorillas in Cameroon.

Eventually, Tierra would like to go to veterinary school. But for now she is content to explore what's just beyond the doors that have been opened for her—or rather the doors she has kicked open for herself.

"I used to be so close-minded about what was possible in life. This has really expanded my horizons because now I see that you can do anything," Tierra says.

—Victoria Hendel De La O is a Santa Clara University writer/editor.

[Campus Map](#) | [Directory](#) | [Site Index](#) | [About SCU](#) | [Search](#)

© 2005 Santa Clara University | [Contact Us](#)

500 El Camino Real Santa Clara, California 95053-1500 | 408-554-4545