

GATEHOUSE MEDIA PHOTO GALLERY

TURMOIL AT THE AUSTIN ZOO: DOCUMENTING A ZOOKEEPERS' REVOLT

HOW ZOOKEEPERS CAME TOGETHER TO QUESTION
ANIMAL CARE, LEADERSHIP AT PRIVATE AUSTIN
FACILITY



GATEHOUSE MEDIA PHOTO GALLERY

For one zookeeper, a long-suffering monkey's death launched a revolt.

Annie was a patas monkey, a large species native to Central Africa, who went blind in 2010, forcing the Austin Zoo to separate her from her peers. Categorized as a dangerous animal, she had no contact with other monkeys or humans for years, zookeepers and the zoo's representatives told the American-Statesman. She was bitten by a rattlesnake and endured a series of strokes that left her partially paralyzed, unable to sit up or feed herself. She developed bed sores all the way to the bone, despite efforts to clean her and prop her on stuffed animals, zookeeper Kris Ledoux said.

Ledoux and other keepers who cared for Annie told the Statesman they believed she was living in pain, would not recover and should be euthanized. But they said the zoo's director wouldn't do it.

Various zookeepers for years had been troubled by decisions made by Austin Zoo leadership that they say caused animals to languish in pain and put their human handlers at risk. They also say management discouraged second opinions or constructive criticism. Off and on, they had discussed whether they could do anything about it.

On April 3, five of them met at a Chuy's restaurant to craft a letter to the zoo's board of

GATEHOUSE MEDIA PHOTO GALLERY



Patti Clark, photographed by the capuchin monkey enclosure in 2016, is both the zoo's executive director and president of its board of directors (DEBORAH CANNON / AMERICAN STATESMAN)

GATEHOUSE MEDIA PHOTO GALLERY

would backfire. Multiple employees would be fired. The board would back zoo Director Patti Clark. And the letter would highlight disputes over what the end of a captive animal's life should look like.

Twenty-four current and former Austin Zoo staff members, 17 of them zookeepers, spoke to the Statesman about what they described as unorthodox animal care techniques, an unwillingness to euthanize suffering animals and acts of retaliation against keepers who raised concerns at the nonprofit facility. Most requested that they not be identified for fear of retaliation in their current jobs or poor references for future ones. The Statesman also obtained numerous emails and other documents describing problems at the zoo.

A board member and a public relations consultant hired by the zoo attribute the accusations to a "clique" of employees trying to bring down

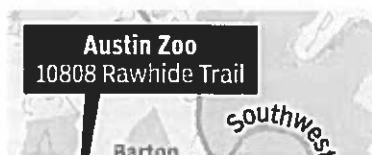
How we reported this story

This story is based on interviews with 24 current and former Austin Zoo staff members, 17 of them zookeepers, who have worked at the zoo in the past six years. Most requested not to be identified for fear of career repercussions. Patti Clark, the zoo's director and board president, declined to answer questions. Instead, a board member and public relations consultant contributed comments from the zoo.

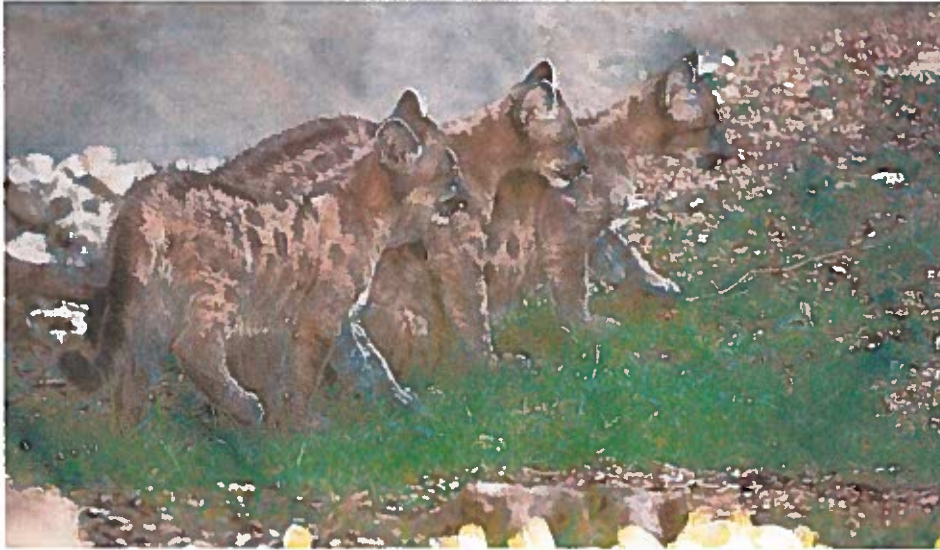
The American-Statesman also obtained a recording of a board meeting and copies of documents, including zookeeper letters to the board, emails between zoo board and staff members and some animal care records and notes.

The Austin Zoo

The zoo property transitioned from a goat ranch to an animal rescue facility during the 1990s. It became a nonprofit zoo in 2000.



GATEHOUSE MEDIA PHOTO GALLERY



Cougar cubs are introduced during a special viewing at the Austin Zoo in December 2015. A hunter, who had shot their mother, discovered the cubs and turned them over to wildlife officials. (DEBORAH CANNON / AMERICAN-STATESMAN)

GATEHOUSE MEDIA PHOTO GALLERY

Austin is by far the largest American city not to have a major zoo accredited with the Association of Zoos & Aquariums. Instead, it has the Austin Zoo, a private, nonprofit animal rescue facility on 15 acres in the limestone hills southwest of Austin that, before the 1990s, had been a goat farm. Today, it houses more than 300 animals, from pigs to tigers, not all of them on display. It employs about 35 people.

At its helm is Clark, a 61-year-old former teacher and paralegal, who took over in 2007 to fix an organization widely considered a mess. In 12 years, she's brought financial stability, turning \$60,000 in credit card debt and miscellaneous bags of receipts and checks into a \$2 million annual operation funded by admissions and donations, according to tax documents filed with the IRS.

Clark is the widow of state District Judge Harley Clark and the owner of various rental properties. She takes no salary to run the zoo full time.

Because the Austin Zoo is a rescue facility, many animals arrive with health problems. The small facility relies on a veterinarian based in Arizona and local vets as needed. Its zookeepers are expected to have biology degrees and at least two years of experience working with animals. With pay that starts at \$10 an hour for grueling work and no benefits, the job's draw is the animals.

GATEHOUSE MEDIA PHOTO GALLERY



The Austin Zoo has more than 300 animals on 15 acres in the hills southwest of Austin. It made the transition from a goat farm to an animal rescue facility in the 1990s. (RALPH BARRERA/ FOR THE AMERICAN-STATESMAN)

rebellion

Last spring, about the same time Ledoux was force-feeding Annie, keepers who tended to large predators also were dealing with an end-of-life case they considered to be heartbreaking. Her name was Babs the bear.

Babs was 33, quite old for a black bear, when employees found her lying on her side alone in February, flailing when she attempted to move. When veterinary care failed to help, they sedated her and brought her inside to a kennel lined with a tarp. She lay there for the next six weeks, according to the zookeepers' accounts.

With Babs unable to sit up, zookeepers would give her water from a hose. When she wouldn't eat, they would tie hotdogs and doughnuts to the end of a stick and try to force her to take it. Since she was lying in her own waste, unable to move, facilities employees would use two-by-fours to flip



Babs, a 33-year-old black bear at the Austin Zoo, was unable to move a few months before she died and lay on her side for about six weeks, keepers said. Crews would use two-by-fours to turn her over.

GATEHOUSE MEDIA PHOTO GALLERY

writers had formed to voice concerns about the zoo's operations. One joined because of Annie, another because of Babs. One quit the zoo in frustration amid their efforts to write to the board. Ford was fired in July, accused of bullying a co-worker. (She later won a Texas Workforce Commission unjustified termination appeal for unemployment benefits.) One had started writing a letter to the board alone. Another had begun a complaint to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, alleging unsafe conditions in several zoo enclosures.

They sought input from other sympathetic keepers but kept the actual writing to themselves.

"We wanted to make sure there were still quality, competent keepers to take care of the animals if we were to be fired for this," one of the six, Kelsey Johansen, later told Austin Zoo board members, according to a recording of a meeting.



Annie, a patas monkey, went blind in 2010, was bitten by a rattlesnake and then suffered a series of strokes that left her partially paralyzed. Zookeepers tried to make her comfortable by setting her on stuffed animals.

GATEHOUSE MEDIA PHOTO GALLERY

Sookie the coati, a member of the raccoon family, who attacked and injured a zookeeper so badly the zookeeper needed surgeries for infections in her hand, according to keepers and the zoo. Zookeeper notes show the incident happened days after keepers warned that Sookie was attacking people and should be moved to an enclosure where keepers could be protected.

The letter spoke of the zoo's four male ostriches, which for years had attacked one another, plucking out large swaths of feathers. Standards of care for animal sanctuaries note that male ostriches should not be housed together.

King told the Statesman that the letter was riddled with inaccuracies, especially in portions raising cleanliness and health concerns, but neither he nor the public relations firm disputed the details of the particular animal cases the Statesman examined.



Wil, a 13-year-old patas monkey, lost part of his tail to frostbite in 2018 when his enclosure did not fully shelter him from cold weather. (RALPH BARRERA/ FOR THE AMERICAN-STATESMAN)

GATEHOUSE MEDIA PHOTO GALLERY



Two of the Austin Zoo's alligators live in stock tanks, where they're completely covered during cold weather months, without access to dry land or sunlight. (RALPH BARRERA/ FOR THE AMERICAN-STATESMAN)

GATEHOUSE MEDIA PHOTO GALLERY

Only about 10 percent of nonprofits the size of the Austin Zoo have a CEO who is also a voting board member, according to a study by BoardSource, which trains and advises nonprofits in best practices. Even fewer have a CEO who is a voting board president.

BoardSource recommends that organizations allow the CEO to attend board meetings but strongly discourages allowing him or her to vote.

"It just creates so many opportunities for conflicts," said Andy Davis, the organization's director of leadership initiatives and education.

High on that list of conflicts is a CEO having the ability to weigh in on appointing new board members, Davis said. In the zoo's case, Clark recommends new board appointments.

Other requests listed in the zookeepers' letter included not taking in any more animals until the current ones have proper enclosures and allowing zookeepers to speak directly with vets.



GATEHOUSE MEDIA PHOTO GALLERY



A zookeeper sweeps a recently constructed prairie dog enclosure Jan. 15. Multiple prairie dogs at the Austin Zoo died in the previous enclosure, which had high walls and sand instead of dirt. (RALPH BARRERA/ FOR THE AMERICAN-STATESMAN)

GATEHOUSE MEDIA PHOTO GALLERY

Since the letter, and the board's investigation, a few things have changed at the zoo.

The prairie dogs have a new enclosure, one not filled with sand, where none has died. A new ostrich enclosure is underway, being built after an anonymous complaint was filed with OSHA in September. Clark first said it would be complete in October but has requested multiple extensions for the project because of rain, according to OSHA correspondence.

The new animal care manager and new veterinarian are widely liked among the zookeepers, though the vet must fly to Austin periodically from her home in Arizona or advise local vets by video.

"Some things may be getting better, but if one person still has control of everything, they can revert back at any time," Ford said. "The board claims to keep her in check. But if she's the president, how can they do that? ... There should be checks and balances, especially when animal lives are at stake and human safety is a factor."

After the letter, at least four other former keepers sent their own letters to the board, raising concerns. Of the 24 current and former staff members who spoke to the Statesman, two praised management and said the complaints in the letter were exaggerated. The others, even those who weren't aware of the letter to the board, told similar stories of animals in their care they said suffered from management decisions and described times they were reprimanded for raising concerns.

GATEHOUSE MEDIA PHOTO GALLERY



A peacock displays his colors as seen on the grounds of the Austin Zoo. (RALPH BARRERA/ FOR THE AMERICAN-STATESMAN)