

TRIBUTE
Wendy Spencer

Onyx

Onyx, one of my very best friends, recently passed away. I have been asked to write a few words to remember him by, but alas, I find myself struggling to write a laudable tribute that will do him justice. According to Webster's Dictionary, a tribute is "something done, given or said to show gratitude, respect, honor and praise." A difficult task to accomplish in just a few paragraphs.

For many of us who work in this profession, we tend to gravitate toward animals rather than humans, and I am no exception. My life happily revolves around the care and well being of my canid friends and over the years I have come to view Wolf Haven as not just a sanctuary for our four legged residents, but as sanctuary to staff, volunteers and visitors as well. For myself, this was due largely in part to my relationship with Onyx. When I started in Animal Care seven years ago, he was one of the very first animals to show affection toward me, rather than wary curiosity (which is so often the case around new people), so naturally I was drawn to him. I continued to cultivate our "friendship" by bringing him special treats in the hopes that he would respond in kind, and respond he did, although I suspect it had more to do with the food rather than any sense of fondness for me.

All my free time was spent at his enclosure. When his mate Tahoma passed in the summer of 2002, I can recall being so concerned that he would miss her gravely, as some of our wolves are wont to do when they loose a longtime companion. However, Onyx surprised us all when instead of displaying behavior that we would typically associate with a wolf who is grieving, he reverted to an almost puppylike state and became much more animated, playful and affectionate with his caretakers.

By the same token though, he was beginning to show his age and because his enclosure was fairly close to the "Howl-In" area, I decided to move him to a smaller, more secluded one. At the time of the move, Onyx was 16, so I could only use a mild sedative, and even that was risky. I can remember baiting him into a crate with hot dogs and closing the gate behind him. He was terrified and I was rife with guilt for putting him through a move at his age, albeit one that I knew would ultimately be for the best.

I sat with him the whole afternoon while the sedative wore off, worrying that he would never forgive me. I gently stroked his head as he tried to watch me through groggy eyes while drifting in and out of a hazy sleep. Each time I took my hand away, he



Above: Onyx as a youngster
Photo by Pat Colton. Center: Wolf Haven fir tree Photo by Julie Lawrence.



Wendy Spencer
and Onyx.
Photo by Monty
Sloan.

would gently inch his head closer, as if to allay my concerns and perhaps to let me know that my presence was of some comfort to him.

Maybe it was my way of making amends, but the next day I decided to bring him lunch. I'm a big fan of "Subway" and so that day I ordered my usual veggie sub and a roast beef sandwich for Onyx – a roast beef deli with American cheese. He wasn't crazy about the bread, but once he picked out the meat and cheese, he'd eventually eat it. His face would light up at the sight, the sound and smell of the bag. He would "dance" from foot to foot in anticipation and his ears would perk forward at the mere sound of the paper wrapper. Lunch hour soon became my favorite time of day and I found myself sitting and chattering away to him – everything from politics to sports to relationship woes. Onyx became my closest confidante and our lunch dates became a regular tradition. For his eighteenth birthday we celebrated with a foot long, double meat roast beef sandwich. It was a bittersweet celebration, for on one hand we had never had a male wolf live to be that old, but I also knew that his time was getting close.

Over the course of the next month his vitality began to wane. He struggled to get himself around his enclosure and one morning he could no longer get up. Euthanasia is never a decision that we enter into lightly, but looking into his eyes as he lay in his shelter, I knew it was time. It was the one final gift that I could offer to my friend – something I could do to show "gratitude, respect, honor and praise."

This past year has been a particularly difficult one – both personally and professionally – but through it all there was Onyx. He was my solace and my refuge and while I celebrate his life, I miss him terribly.

