



Tina, November 2010. PHOTO BY JULIE LAWRENCE.

Tina – her final howl

Sandra Lynch-Bakken, Guest

This article was written by someone who hand-raised Tina while she resided at the Nebraska Zoo. The Zoo's approach to working with captive wolves differs from Wolf Haven's more hands-off philosophy of interacting with wildlife. As evident from this touching tribute, Tina was well-loved.

IT WAS SEPTEMBER 1995 when I first met Tina and the other members of the Heritage Pack – Solo, Shilo and Shadow – at the Nebraska Zoo. I was green behind the ears when it came to wolf knowledge. In my eagerness to understand the species and my selfish desire to get close to them, I abandoned all good sense and caution. I literally “rushed right in,” and once in the midst of the pack I stood amazed that they actually tolerated me – a total stranger. Perhaps they felt sorry for this silly human. Whatever it was, they allowed me to stay and stay I did, until our months together grew into years. Each wolf determined what kind of relationship he or she wanted with me, but it was with Tina, or Teen, as I called her, that I developed a special bond.

It was just past 7:00 pm when

I entered the wolf exhibit that September. The sun was getting ready to close her eyes on the day, and the autumn air was such that your skin begged for a sweater. As I sat on a fallen log under the old oak tree, all four wolves began to circle, until the distance between us vanished. Without question my urge to leave was strong, but something stopped me. Within seconds Solo was behind me sniffing my hair. Shadow leaned up against my legs and Shilo paced back and forth directly in front of me.

Tina did something that erased the barrier between human and animal. With both front paws pressed into my lap, her breath on my cheek, she pitched forward and licked my lips. My heart pounded, and fear filled every pore. But then it was gone and in its place was bliss. A kiss, simple in its action, yet far reaching in the message it held. Teen and I would share many firsts, but what happened three years later revealed how incredible this wolf was.

The air was balmy that day, typical for a Nebraska spring, but underground it was quite different, cold and dark. A whimper could be heard. Tina had given birth; how many pups, no one knew. I offered to go down her den armed only with a web cam. What I did not know was just how narrow the tunnel was to the den. Clearly it was

dug by a sleek-bodied wolf, not a heavy human. However, with much wriggling, belly crawling and anxiety I managed to squeeze myself down the tight tunnel to the den cavity. Teen's face seemed massive as she glared at me. At that moment my only hope was my familiar smell and voice would stop her from attacking the intruder. And it did.

Trust. It is what led me down the hole in the first place, and is what kept me safe. With joy in our hearts, we watched from above ground as her two pups nursed. As the years passed, her pups grew up, Tina became more of a beauty and my hair began to gray. It had been a year since I had last seen Teen, but we were reunited on a drizzly day this past April when I visited Wolf Haven. I stood by the fence calling her name and sadness filled my soul. I had just visited with Chinook and said my goodbyes to him. Would this be my last time with Teen as well? She peered at me from behind the large fir tree, but did not move. Evidently she was determining whether it was worthwhile to move her sixteen year old body toward this human.

I showed her the turkey leg I was holding, which convinced her it was worth the effort. She cautiously came up alongside the fence and sniffed the air. “Hi Teen, remember me old girl?” I quietly said. “I guess we’re both old girls now, aren’t we?” She came closer and looked into my eyes. They were not as I remembered, brilliant amber, but rather more the color of old ivory. I knelt down and extended my hand for her to smell. And as she had done so many times before, she gave an old friend a much wished for gift – a kiss to my palm.

“Thank you Teen,” I softly said, hoping she understood my thanks were not just for that moment, but for the hundreds of other moments she had given me over the years.

Seven months later Tina died, and as I sat crying, I reflected back on what the name Tina means – the river. I realized how true to her name she was. Powerful at times yet also reserved. Unpredictable when confronted with new obstacles, but always conquering them. And as a river kisses the shoreline defining its domain, Tina bestowed kisses upon those she considered part of her family. 