



TONKAWA PHOTO BY JULIE LAWRENCE.

# Tonkawa

Daniel Curry, *Animal Care Specialist*

HAVE YOU EVER MET anyone that you really liked, but no matter what you did, they just didn't reciprocate the feeling? No matter how hard you tried to befriend them or earn their trust, they put up a wall and would not welcome you into their world. That's how I always felt when I was around Tonkawa; she wanted no part of humans - except for maybe a hand or two.

When I first met Tonkawa, I was actually being introduced to her enclosure mate, who happened to be her father, Chinook. I hadn't seen another animal inside the enclosure and my first indication that she was near was the soft, but rapid foot falls of an ambushing Tonkawa. When I looked up, it was too late; the trap had been sprung and I was showered by small pebbles being thrown into the air as she glided gracefully to a stop. She stood for a moment with her head held high and her near white eyes locked onto mine. She knew that I was awed by her impressive introduction, but she wanted to make sure that I respected her as well. She had spent too much of her life on the bottom of the ladder not being respected, and there was no way that she was going to climb down anytime soon.

Tonkawa had many hardships in her unfortunately short life. But it was how she dealt with them that chiseled her into the stalwart girl that I loved. As long as I knew her, she always faced things head on, without fear. The only time that I saw her scared was when we had to catch her up to take her to the veterinarian to get two mast cell tumors, a very aggressive type of cancer, removed from

her forelimbs. It made me sad to see her like that, especially because we were the origin of that fear, no matter how good our intentions. Tonkawa passed away in early June.

Tonkawa's trust was not easily given. I never saw her give her trust to a human except once and on that day, Tonkawa opened up a different side of her spirit to me. It was the side that she always kept hidden, afraid to reveal how delicate she truly was under that granite-like exterior. I felt that she didn't want anyone to know that she wasn't just the stalwart girl that she had trained herself to be. This hidden element of Tonkawa was light, very fragile, and soft, all intertwined with love and trust. Chinook, her loving father, knew this other side of her well, and I believe that he was the only being that she ever felt comfortable fully showing herself to. Instead of exploiting her, he righteously put himself in front of potential threats to his daughter and protected her.

On the day of the vet appointment, we had to separate Chinook and Tonkawa so that we could safely catch her up without her father standing in front of us. Tonkawa's usual hardness slipped away as soon as she had to stand alone against the humans focused on her. She was scared and had no one to stick up for her. This time, she was alone.

It didn't take long for her to find a dark place to curl up in to try to get away. This dark place was also soon invaded and it was in this corner of her shelter that I met the lighter side of Tonkawa. When I entered, she was very frightened and curled up in the smallest ball that she could form. She wasn't

even looking at me. As I slowly reached toward her with a head cover, she tilted her head slightly toward me and glanced into my eyes with as much gentleness as I had ever seen in her. In that one second it was just she and I and it was our individual choices that dictated what would follow. In that moment, something profound and yet so simple happened. We exchanged trust as easily as two kids would trade baseball cards.

Pure trust is a beautiful thing that can never be taken for granted and should never be treated lightly. An animal's trust is only given in its purest form. Since they do not collect materials like most humans, trust is one of the few things that they hold onto and give selectively. Some give it to all that they meet without much persuasion, but some may never hand it over to anyone in their lifetime. Once you have been given the precious gift of an animal's trust, you must keep it close to your heart and nurture it like a beautiful blossom, for if you do it will continue to grow. If taken for granted, it will wilt and die, never to return.

Tonkawa, the day that you and I regarded one another as fellow spirits was a very special day for both of us. I will always cherish that moment in time. I am thankful for your gift and I recognize how hard it was for you to give. I am honored that I could stand with you that day, and that we could face the fear together. I am thankful that you gave me the strength to take the better path. I miss you very much. You had a fire in you that not many others possess - neither human nor animal.

I will see you again someday, Tonkawa.