

**Remember Jerom
February 13, 2003**

Around the world, 15000 people are newly infected with HIV every day. Since the beginning of the epidemic, millions have died, my own friend Eric - a 29 year old painter and poet - among them. In the last few years, the media has reported on the development of a number of HIV vaccine hopefuls, and yet today there is still no cure. The first potential vaccine to complete all three phases of clinical (human) trials has just come to an end, and the results of the vaccine's effectiveness will be revealed in the coming weeks. Sadly, the projected outlook is not hopeful, but whether the vaccine is determined to be a success or a failure, what will not be discussed are the research subjects used in the years of pre-clinical research.

The handful of chimpanzees were almost certainly kept in biocontainment - a controlled airflow building, with limited access by humans, and probably no opportunity to go outdoors. They were "knocked down" regularly - anesthetized to have their blood drawn - if not always a terror-invoking experience, at the very least an incredibly unpleasant one. The chimpanzees who were used in the creation of the VaxGen vaccine are probably alive today in a laboratory, living with one or several cell mates in cages of concrete and bars. If the vaccine is successful, they will not be remembered.

I don't know the identity of these study subjects, but when I worked at the Yerkes Primate Center, in Atlanta, I was privileged to know another named Jerom. He was also an AIDS research subject, and was euthanized seven years ago today at the age of fourteen, because he was seriously immune compromised and had developed severe anemia. He had been experimentally infected with HIV at the age of two - an age at which wild chimpanzees are rarely separated from their mothers by more than a few feet. Jerom grew up indoors, in concrete and steel, with just one other baby for companionship. When he was an adolescent, he and the other twelve HIV infected individuals in the study were moved to their permanent housing - a dungeon-like concrete box, divided into eleven dark, damp prison cells. At the time I worked at the lab, the cells had no windows, so none of the chimpanzees knew about anything happening outside.

I met them when Jerom had been sick for about six months. He was so wasted I could see the bones of his skull, and so desperate that he let me see him cry. We became friends because I was the only one allowed to be his friend (he was separated from his cage-mates), although we were separated by cage bars and 2% of our DNA - a most unnatural relationship. In the six months before his death, sometimes we had fun together, many times we were peaceful, and we had many dark days. I spent my time entertaining all of the residents of the Chimpanzee Infectious Disease building. I

helped alleviate the crushing boredom of their lives, and in return they showed me that individuals matter, no matter what their species.

It is with infinite sadness that I've learned that three more of those individuals have passed away. Roberta and I were close. She's the first chimpanzee I ever got in an argument and made up with. She liked to play different versions of the game "chase," for which she had rules. I was playing with her one day and broke one of the rules, and when I did she let me know it by screaming at me. I felt terrible and held out my hand ("I'm sorry" in chimpanzee), and she climbed down to touch my fingers ("no sweat"). Roberta was a smallish girl - still just in her teens at the time - with an open face and clear, intelligent eyes. She was euthanized last summer when lab results showed her to be in renal failure. She was only 22 years old.

Nathan was the first guy I met in the building. At the time, I was hot and sweaty, cooking in my Tyvek suit, shoving heaps and heaps of old straw from the chimps' cages into biohazard bags. I was in front of Nate's cell and he was grinning at me with his big crooked grin - he seemed to think what I was doing was very funny. We hit it off immediately. Nathan had been one of the two "control" subjects in the building, but when Jerom's illness looked like it would be terminal, researchers decided to infect Nathan with Jerom's blood. Anesthetizing Nathan was a horrible experience - he evaded the high-pressure dart gun for so long that he exhausted himself, and was tranquilized with an anesthetic / immobilizing compound (meaning that he was not out cold). He was laid on the floor of the building next to Jerom, and blood was taken from Jerom's arm and injected directly into Nathan's. Jerom recovered, Nathan's immune system responded abysmally to the virus, and my friend never trusted me again because I participated in that ordeal. Nathan lived alone in his 9 foot x 9 foot x 11 foot cell for the last years of his life; he died last month of sepsis, at the young age of 23.

Despite my best efforts to keep informed about goings-on at Yerkes, I did not know that Betsie died in 2001. She and I were not friends because her cell mates wouldn't allow it. Of the three, Betsie was the lowest ranking and the other two females did not hesitate to keep her in her place. They often tormented and bullied her into staying up high in the cages, and as a result she was constantly fearful of them. Because she didn't come forward for human interaction very often, it was not discovered until it was too late that Betsie had been ill for some time, and that her body was wasting away. She must have been in a great deal of pain. Her autopsy revealed that she was suffering from acute peritonitis and liver abscesses.

The remaining chimpanzees - Buster, Arctica, Joye, Marc, Jonah, Tika and Hallie - are still study subjects. The project of which they are the integral part seeks only to prove that chimpanzees can die of chimpanzee AIDS. And they are dying - whether from the laboratory-simulated disease or the overwhelming and unending boredom of their bleak existence, they are dying cruel, needless deaths. Even when they are no longer being studied, the research kills them - an entire lifetime of stress

and scars, wet cages, and slamming doors wears them down. Make no mistake, these are your tax dollars at work.

While it seems clear the chimpanzees are not widely used in HIV research any more due to the acceptance that they are not an appropriate model for the disease, chimpanzee research continues in other areas, including but not limited to hepatitis, malaria and toxicology research. While those individuals are not generally confined to biocontainment quarters, the restrictions placed on study subjects are often just as severe and the relevance to and benefit for humans just as questionable.

I am asking you to care about the lives of these individuals because each of them is somebody who suffered or who is suffering now. I am not asking you to stop caring about the humans suffering in so many ways around the world, but only to cast the net of your compassion wider. Regardless of whether biomedical research on chimpanzees provides drugs or vaccines suitable to cure human problems, biomedical research causes so much suffering for chimpanzees and monkeys that it should not be tolerated and its justifications judged unacceptable. When researchers stopped using human subjects in pre-clinical studies, it was lamented that research would never progress. But it has moved forward without the best study subjects for human conditions - humans - and it can move forward without the use of nonhuman primates. When you hear the news about the VaxGen vaccine, think of the chimpanzees behind it and know that whether the treatment works or not, the chimpanzees will be sitting in their cells, waiting for the next knockdown.

For those of you who are former lab workers, and have worked with monkeys or chimpanzees, we need your help. It's time for you to speak up for your non-human primate friends. If you've read this far, you must know what I'm talking about, and why your voice is needed. If you cannot openly join LPAG, please consider telling the stories anonymously. We will post your tributes to your friends on our Memorials page. We are also building a web page dedicated to our frustrations - stories we've lived that we were powerless to control because the situations were all legal. However you do it, speak now and speak loudly!

This tribute was written in memory of Jerom Chimpanzee, this year and every year until chimpanzee research stops.

Rachel Weiss