Our Mission

The Center for Great Apes’ mission is to provide a permanent sanctuary for orangutans and chimpanzees who have been rescued or retired from the entertainment industry, from research, or from the exotic pet trade. The Center provides care with dignity in a safe, healthy, and enriching environment for great apes in need of lifetime care.
Message from the Founder

When we first purchased our Wauchula sanctuary property two decades ago, we were thrilled to find this beautiful location full of huge shade trees, numerous exotic fruit trees, and a flowing creek (not to mention an abundance of native wildlife which still inhabit our grounds). It was an ideal and comfortable place for a sanctuary.

Our first challenge was to build spacious outdoor areas for the apes that provided arboreal opportunities for climbing up high like wild apes can do. And we wanted to preserve the shade trees and beautiful woods as well.

The recent tragic death of a zoo gorilla after a child entered his moat has resulted in a lot of social media chatter about captive great apes and their habitats. Public demand for large naturalistic enclosures with unobstructed views has resulted in zoos spending tens of millions of dollars on environments that are visually appealing to the public, enriching for the animals, and safe for both.

Since sanctuaries are not open to the public and do not charge admission to large numbers of visitors, there is far less money available to build habitats. Funds raised through donations must be carefully spent to build the best space that encourages natural great ape activities and still provides safety for apes and humans. Open islands or fenced-in fields are wonderful, but many factors must be considered in designing open habitats including varying water table levels in droughts or floods, drowning incidents, and state laws like those governing the use of electric fences.

In 1997, we started with geodesic-style domes (three-stories tall) and later built larger domes that are four stories (42-feet) high – all joined by more than a mile of an aerial trail system. These tall enclosures and elevated chutes are built with wire mesh for both the apes’ and humans’ safety. Using mesh provides security overhead while giving the orangutans and chimpanzees more vertical square footage for climbing.

When people ask us “why are they in cages?” we explain that whether the safety barrier is a dry moat or water moat… electric fence or wire mesh… they are all still in an enclosed area for their safety and ours. In these tall domes, the orangutans and chimpanzees have choices of different height levels within their dome as well as the choice to move around through the aerial trailways to the sixteen different enclosures for even more exploration and enrichment.

However, as the Center for Great Apes expands again to help additional chimpanzees and orangutans retired from biomedical research and entertainment, we have the opportunity to build a different type of habitat – large open fields out in our adjoining orange grove property. A large new nighthouse that will provide room for 10 to 18 apes will be completed this summer, and we’re planning “open-top acreage” adjoining this new nighthouse where the apes will have additional running-room in tall grasses with climbing and shade structures. The barrier will be a special perimeter that will safely provide containment in this natural play yard. We have wonderful plans for the new area… but are still in need of funding.

Thank you for your generous past support, and please help us continue to provide sanctuary care for chimpanzees and orangutans by being a part of this exciting expansion!

Gatti Ragan
Volunteers

Our dedicated volunteers are vital to helping us provide the quality of care we are able to give our great ape residents! Day after day, 365 days a year, our volunteers give their time to help with things like ape laundry, habitat cleaning, grounds work, maintenance projects, gardening, diet prep, ape enrichment, office mailings, special projects, and so much more.

The Center for Great apes has two volunteer class sessions a year, held in January and July, which run for three consecutive weekends each session. In these classes, volunteers learn more about primates, safety protocols, history of the Center, and the types of volunteer opportunities available to help with daily sanctuary operations. After completing the classes, volunteer trainees then train one-on-one with our docents and caregivers, learning the protocols of the Center’s different departments.

Does volunteering at the Center for Great Apes sound like something you would be interested in? If so, please consider joining our next class session in January 2017 by contacting our Volunteer Coordinator, Joy at 863-767-8903 ext. 230 or email Volunteer@CenterforGreatApes.org.

We are so appreciative of all the hard work and commitment from our volunteers!

We couldn’t do this without our wonderful volunteers!

New Logo

Earlier this year we ran our first Bonfire Funds T-shirt campaign which featured a new graphic that the company designed for us. The campaign was so successful that we not only reached our goal, but we were able to exceed it!

We received such great feedback about the T-shirt design that we decided to make it our new Center for Great Apes logo. With a few modifications from the original design, we love our new logo and hope you will too. Bonfire Funds agreed to donate all of their services in designing the new logo, and we cannot thank them enough!

Bonfire is built on the foundation of “the power of community and paying it forward”. They “choose to donate their time and a portion of their profits to causes that fit into these three categories: organizations that support children with special needs and cancer, grassroots community organizations, and organizations that support our environment”. –Bonfire Funds
Meet the Managers

Diane Beatty
Membership & Office Operations Manager

For years, Diane has been the first person our callers would talk to on the phone as well as the first person our visitors would see when arriving at the sanctuary. Beginning her work here as an office assistant, Diane gained valuable experience in the business management of the Center becoming Membership Coordinator, then Office Manager. Today, Diane and her team of four staff members handle office operations, computer database systems, bookkeeping, memberships & renewals, special events, and special fundraising activities.

Diane grew up in Iowa, and she and her husband Rob (a high school science & biology teacher) moved to Wauchula 11 years ago with their son Brandon (who is now a college student). Even though Diane’s work duties are in the office, she enjoys taking strolls around the Center on her lunch breaks and spending time with her favorite orangutan, Popi. Diane is celebrating her ninth anniversary at CGA this summer!

Tony Snead
Maintenance Manager

Tony has also been with CGA for nine years and started his work at the Center as part-time Feed Room staff preparing the apes’ meals. As we learned more about his talents and capabilities, Tony was moved into the maintenance department and worked closely for years with our former maintenance supervisor Tom “Hippy” Kainz until Hippy retired last year. Today, Tony and his crew of four maintenance staff members handle all kinds of duties at the sanctuary including new construction, ape habitat upkeep & repairs, building repairs, grounds upkeep, and all the plumbing, welding, and electrical issues that need attention on a regular basis.

Tony and his wife Shannon (a chimpanzee caregiver and vet tech at the Center for Great Apes) live down the road from our sanctuary with their four-year-old daughter, Olivia, and a large animal family of dogs, cats, goats, horses, and many rescued and rehabilitated turtles and tortoises.

Rhonda Pietsch
Ape Care Manager

With over 30 years working with great apes in Florida, Colorado, and Iowa Rhonda has extensive experience in managing ape caregivers and their duties in supporting and caring for orangutans and chimpanzees. She started her career as a caregiver at the Lowry Park Zoo in Tampa and then spent many years at the Denver Zoo where she first met the orangutan Allie. When Allie became ill as a juvenile with a serious nerve disorder which left her arms and legs initially paralyzed, Rhonda was there with her to give young Allie therapy to help her regain the use of her arms. Later, when the Denver Zoo sent Allie to the Great Ape Trust in Iowa, Rhonda followed Allie there, devoting herself to helping Allie regain more physical functions and mobility.

Today, Rhonda manages our 14 caregivers and food prep staff to provide our chimpanzees and orangutans (including Allie) with a healthy diet, enriching activities, successful social groups, and the best care possible. Rhonda shares her home with a number of rescued pets - 8 cats and 2 parrots.

Caregiver Staff Members
At age 45, Popi is the oldest of the 15 orangutans living at the Center for Great Apes. She has a long history in entertainment first in Hollywood movies in Clint Eastwood’s *Any Which Way You Can* and then with Tony Danza and Danny DiVito in *Going Ape*. Popi went on to be a performer in a nightclub act in Las Vegas for over 20 years until it was discovered that she and the other orangutans were being “severely disciplined” before each performance. The resulting lawsuit was the first of its kind around the mistreatment of great apes.

Popi eventually was sent to a cognitive research center in Iowa (the Great Ape Trust) where both bonobos and orangutans were studied in a language research program. When the Great Ape Trust experienced a financial crisis, Popi’s future was uncertain. At that point, one of her caregivers there (Rhonda Pietsch) contacted the Center for Great Apes asking for help. After lengthy discussions with the Trust’s Board of Directors and their staff, it was finally decided that both Popi and the partially paralyzed female orangutan Allie would be sent to the Center for Great Apes for sanctuary care for the rest of their lives.

Five of the Iowa Trust’s former staff members volunteered to drive Popi and Allie to Florida. One of those former caregivers, Andy Antilla, had already moved to Seattle to be an orangutan caregiver at the Woodland Park Zoo. Generously, the zoo supported his time off to help move the two orangutan ladies to our sanctuary. Another of the Iowa caregivers, Jackie Mobley, worked here for the past four years with Popi and Allie as their caregiver in their new home. And, Rhonda Pietsch, the caregiver who initiated the call to us about accepting Popi and Allie is now our Ape Care Manager supervising the caregiver activities for not only Popi & Allie, but all the orangutans and chimpanzees at the Center for Great Apes.
“Popi surprised me from the first time I met her. Despite her storied history as a performing ape, she had such a gentle and calm soul. Over a fairly short time she began to trust us and became a willing participant in her daily care. In 2012, I was more than happy to help with the transfer of Popi and Allie from Iowa’s Great Ape Trust to the Center for Great Apes in Florida. When I heard that they were going to be moving, I knew I wanted to be part of their relocation. Getting them to a safe place was paramount. Both Popi and Allie had unique backgrounds, and it was clear to me that a sanctuary with a high level of care was the best place for them to be. I’m so thankful to the Center for Great Apes for providing Popi, Allie, and all the apes there a peaceful and permanent home.”  - Andy Antilla

“I have known and worked with Popi for eight years, and we have gone through several transitions along the way. It has always been important to me that our friendship be based on honesty and trust. Popi had suffered physical and mental abuse in her past, so I wanted her to know that she could live with dignity and respect for the rest of her life. I would honor her choices.

Our journey began in Iowa at the Great Ape Trust where we quickly became good friends. She learned that she had choices of who her companions would be for the day. She could decide whether to be inside or outside. And where to spend the night. That may sound minor but think how important those decisions are if you have never been allowed to make them, and you were 37 years old.” - Rhonda Pietsch
Ape Adoptions

Happily, our Ape Adoption program has continued to grow over the last few years. Last year was the first time that all 43 of the Center’s great ape residents had at least one adoptive parent! While some of our orangutans and chimpanzees are very popular and have a number of adoptive parents, others are not as well-known and have been the last to be adopted. Several of the apes are “camera shy”, and we don’t have as many pictures to feature of them. So, in order to help shine some light on these wonderful great apes, we have taken to social media and created “Ape Spotlight” segments on Facebook. Every month two apes are featured, one chimpanzee and one orangutan, in hopes that by sharing their stories with a larger audience, they too can capture the hearts of our supporters.

Ape adoptions are a donation of $300 a year or $25 monthly for one year. Your full donation goes directly to the support of your ape. With annual care costs for each ape a little over $20,000 every year... our apes all need a LOT of adoptive parents!

If you would like to join our adoptive parent family, please visit our website at: www.CenterforGreatApes.org/donate/adopt-ape. You can also contact our Education & Outreach Coordinator, Lauren at 863-767-8903 ext. 222 or email: outreach@centerforgreatapes.org

Member Events:

Your Opportunity to Visit the Orangutans and Chimpanzees

Twice a year, in the spring and again in December, we invite our members (and their guests) to visit the sanctuary and meet the Center’s wonderful orangutans and chimpanzees — to see who they are supporting and why it’s so important. Our members can stroll the sanctuary grounds, listen to a caregiver talk, find special treasures in a silent auction, and shop at the Ape Art table. Invitations are mailed out to current members four weeks before the events, so don’t forget to renew your membership!
Ape-ology

A special thank you to everyone who has participated in our Ape-ology workshops since their inception in February 2015. Many of the Ape-ology participants have become “regulars” attending several of the workshops, if not all of them, and we love seeing all the new faces too!

Ape-ology is a three-hour, monthly workshop program which covers specific areas around protecting and caring for orangutans and chimpanzees. We’re constantly thinking of new and exciting things to integrate into each workshop, whether it’s going behind the scenes into a great ape nighthouse or trying your hand at some great ape enrichment devices! Some of the popular new topics for this year have been enriching the lives of great apes, how apes communicate, and a day in the life of a great ape caregiver. In addition to offering new workshop topics this year, we also have a variety of staff specialists to assist with the workshops, including our ape dietician, our caregivers, and one of our veterinary technicians. In the coming months, special guests including our Founding Director Patti Ragan, Board Member & Animal Advocate Wally Baldwin, and Primatologist Bob Ingersoll of Project Nim will join us to discuss the history of the sanctuary, the palm oil crisis, and the current status of captive great apes. In 2017, we’ll continue to offer different and new workshop subjects in addition to some of this year’s more popular classes.

Each Ape-ology session consists of an educational presentation and a special opportunity to observe the apes and talk with their caregivers. For more information on Ape-ology or to sign up for a class, please visit:

www.centerforgreatapes.org/how-you-can-help/
education-and-outreach/
or email outreach@centerforgreatapes.org.

Endangered: Art4Apes

The 4th annual ENDANGERED Art & Photography contest is underway! This global, juried, online art contest, benefiting the Center for Great Apes, aims to focus attention on the plight of endangered and threatened species/habitats. Categories include Fine Art (including sculpture), Photography, and Wearable Art (including jewelry). Started by a CGA board member, the contest unites art lovers and environmentalists who believe that art in all forms can reach people and win hearts and minds for the cause of preserving life and the environment. The annual event, Endangered: Art4Apes, is held from February to October with cash prizes in each category and an exhibition held in Miami in late November/early December. In addition to showcasing some very beautiful art, this event has raised awareness of endangered animals, plants, and ecosystems. To view past and current submissions, check out the Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/art4apes. For more information on entries and the competition, visit www.art4apes.com.
Planned Giving

Philanthropy is the desire to promote the welfare of others. Every person, regardless of financial means, has the ability to make a difference and change the world!

The impact of planned gifts or legacy gifts and bequests to a charity helps ensure their continued existence. A bequest to the Center for Great Apes will mean your name is always remembered for making life better for the orangutans and chimpanzees at the sanctuary.

Properly planned charitable giving can also provide substantial tax benefits to you and your family, both now and in the future. There are a number of ways to invest in the future of the Center such as:

- Bequests in your will
- Revocable Living Trust
- Charitable Remainder & Charitable Lead Trust
- Endowments
- IRA - 401K - Life Insurance
- Stocks, Bond & Annuities

Your financial advisor, attorney, or tax professional can advise you on which alternatives may be best to accomplish your charitable goals.

To learn more about planned giving to the Center for Great Apes, please contact our development office at (863) 767-8903 or email Legacy@CenterforGreatApes.org

Legacy Society

The Center for Great Apes Legacy Society is a new, distinguished group reserved for those generous supporters who have chosen to include a gift to the Center in their will or estate plans. Those who join our Legacy Society through a will, trust, designation or other planned gift are invited to join. Too often, these gifts are unrecognized because we are unaware of these special gifts until the donor has passed away and proper appreciation cannot be expressed. The Legacy Society provides a way to recognize and thank donors during their lifetime, and ensures that your wishes are properly documented. Only a letter or statement of intent to leave a gift to the Center is required for membership. If you have already included the Center in your planning, we encourage you to let us know so that we may honor you as a Charter Member of the Center for Great Apes Legacy Society.

Please contact us at: Legacy@CenterforGreatApes.org for more information.
Update on Sanctuary Expansion

With the help of our generous members and supporters, our multi-year expansion plans are moving ahead! Last year we completed the Smith Family Nutrition Center, and this summer we’ll finish a new 9-bedroom nighthouse that will connect to a large open-top grassy area. These new spacious sleeping quarters will allow us to accept additional great apes needing care. All the current ape habitats will eventually connect to this new nighthouse and outdoor acreage play yard via our aerial trailway system. So all the residents at the Center will have opportunities to choose this area for optimum enrichment and exploration.

And, we’re starting our next expansion project in a few weeks by doubling the size of our veterinary health clinic! Stay tuned for that progress this fall.

Our Elders at the Sanctuary

Many of the apes at the sanctuary arrived as youngsters and are now in their teens and twenties. And others have arrived as older adults and now are our very special “elders”. Last year, we saw the passing of two of our dearest elderly chimpanzees, Denyse (46 years) and Clyde (50 years). Coming from a variety of backgrounds... some loving, and some very challenging... our goal with all of them is to make their later years peaceful, happy, and well-cared for with dignity and love.

Marco, Butch, Toddy, Oopsie, and Chipper

Popi, Radcliffe