

## **Chimp Change: The Fate of Retired Apes**

By Brenda Scott Royce, Posted May 1, 2008  
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Think your pension is in peril? It could be worse. You could be a chimpanzee.

Prompted by yet another dire report about the numbers of Americans facing poverty in retirement, I visited an online financial site to determine whether I'm fated to join their ranks. After plugging my salary, savings, and IRA balance into the retirement calculator, I learned that--barring unforeseen events--if my current earnings and savings rate continue, I have a 55% chance of building my nest egg sufficiently to retire at age 65.

The realization that I only have a fifty-fifty chance of a secure retirement should probably have sent me into paroxysms of panic. But instead it got me thinking about another group of retirees who face a far less certain future.

BamBam is an orangutan who is retired from the entertainment industry. Best known for a two-year stint on the soap opera *Passions*, where he played a nurse named Precious (really), BamBam left show biz at age six, when he grew too strong to be managed. Now eight, he's one of 43 apes living at the Center for Orangutan and Chimpanzee Conservation in Wauchula, Florida.

The majority of the Center's residents are retired performing apes--chimpanzees and orangutans whose combined list of credits would make most human actors green with envy. It's the primate equivalent of the Motion Picture Actors Retirement Home. But those human stars of yesteryear have SAG looking out for them; Retired apes receive no residuals from their life's work, and efforts to establish retirement funds on their behalf have stalled.

Apes in show biz have a short shelf life. The average performing chimp begins his career around age 2. By 7 or 8, when he's no longer the tractable trainee he once was, he's put out to pasture. Owners tend to not want to keep apes that have outlived their earning potential, and since apes can live into their fifties, that means they'll require decades of care after their careers end. And that care is expensive--roughly \$10,000 a year for a single ape. And while typically everyone involved with a film--from cast and crew to producers, studios, distributors, investors, and exhibitors--makes money, nothing is put aside for the animals' future.

There's no denying that apes entertain. As a child I was hugely enamored of the simian stars of *BJ and the Bear* and *Every Which Way But Loose*, and such fare probably inspired my later desire to work with chimpanzees. It's hard not to smile at a chimp in a TV commercial--even when it's dressed in a business suit and yakking into a cell phone, or otherwise mimicking human activity.

But what happens to performing primates once they're past their prime? The lucky ones end up in facilities like the Center in Wauchula. But with 43 apes in residence--and more on the waiting list--the Center's resources are stretched to capacity. As for the less fortunate ones, horror stories abound of apes emaciated by years spent in small cages in someone's garage, or being shot after escaping from a roadside zoo.

One of the Center's charges is Bella, who starred in a series of mega-popular CareerBuilder ads. Their viral campaign, which allowed people to send customizable Monk-E-Mail (chimps lip-synch your message) was hugely successful, reaping loads of press and profits for the company. But what about Bella?

It was with Bella and BamBam in mind that I plugged some more figures into the retirement calculator. I wanted to see how their chances of financially secure future stacked up to mine. I envisioned a chimpanzee--let's call him BoBo--just beginning his cinematic career. Current age: 2. Age at retirement: 8. Life expectancy: 55. Annual income needed at retirement: \$10,000 (adjusted for inflation). Social Security benefits: none.

I factored in some assets for my imaginary ape--a few donations from kind-hearted animal lovers and perhaps even a modest stipend contributed by his trainer. After a moment's hesitation, the screen revealed that my phantom ape needed to raise \$238,994 for his retirement. That's chump change compared to what a human retiree needs, but for an animal paid in peanuts and praise?

The calculator's prognosis: "We estimate that there is a 0.00% chance of this happening."

Poor BoBo.

I went back and tweaked my figures some more, making my donors more generous and lowering life expectancy to 50. But no matter how I crunched the numbers, BoBo's future remained bleak. Zero percent chance.

Suddenly my fifty-fifty odds don't seem so bad.

I'm not sure why I'm more depressed by my imaginary ape's retirement prospects than my own. Perhaps because I still have many working years ahead in which I can try to catch up. Or because I've met some of these apes firsthand and know the challenges involved in caring for them. More likely it's because, as a consumer of their product, I feel a certain responsibility toward them. After all, if we exploit animals for our entertainment (and there are alternatives to doing so, such as CGI), shouldn't we also take responsibility for their post-career care?