

## **Michael Jackson's pet chimp Bubbles retires in Florida**

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The phone calls clamored in from Miami, Europe and Australia to the line of a tiny office near Perez's Produce and Pig Farm.

Is it true? they asked the receptionist. Do you really have Bubbles, Michael Jackson's old chimpanzee, there in . . . how do you pronounce the name of that town?

Yes it's true. Bubbles -- Jackson's beloved chimp, the primate skeptic used as telltale sign of the pop star's eccentricity, the darling face in the video -- had long left Neverland. And he's retired in an ape sanctuary in the middle of Florida.

To understand the long reach of a single sequined glove, a parable exists about 200 miles northwest of Miami off of U.S. 27 at the Center of Great Apes. Bubbles has lived here alongside 41 other aging chimpanzees and orangutans for four years, with virtually no one squealing about it. That was until two weeks ago, when his infamous owner confounded the world and suddenly died of cardiac arrest.

A place that averages three media requests a year soon received dozens in days. For the first time, they needed a publicist. The media kept badgering with similar, strange questions: Does Bubbles still moonwalk? Does he know the King of Pop is dead? And, most important, can we go see him?

Founder and director Patti Ragan told the vast majority of them no, fearing a tranquil locale -- not open to the public, it is a sanctuary after all -- would be transformed to some media zoo that conflicted its actual purpose.

Here, Bubbles the Chimp got the life his owner coveted for himself: a chance to live outside the public eye.

He is 26 years old now, around four feet tall, a pudgy 165 pounds. The chimp who dined with Liz Taylor and sat in the very studio while the Bad album was being recorded now spends his days in a 35-foot-high, 35 feet wide, 90-foot-long enclosure with his new, hairier family: Sam, Oopsie, Boma, Jessie, Kodua and the baby, Bobby Stryker.

Some days, he likes to climb to the top of his futuristic cage and sit alone. Up high, he stares into the distance.

"He's a very dignified chimp," Ragan said at the center's office. "Everyone knows him as the pink-eared, pink-faced chimp in the red suit. But the world has missed his adolescence and adulthood. He's not the same."

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The tiny office is barely a dot on the lush, 120-acre property, where treetops overshadow treetops. The apes all live in large geodesic domes that connect to 4,000 feet of elevated tunnels, allowing them to peer into the kitchen where a cook prepares food, mosey into the veterinarian's center when they seek treatment, or gossip over a creek that runs through the property.

Ragan jumped into a slow-moving cart. Tracing along a path she rides several times a day, she's serenaded by the whoop of the woodpecker and the howl of the orangutan.

"Hi, Sweetheart," she calls to him in a high-pitched voice. "How's my boy?"

Bubbles stands on his knuckles and turns his neck to see her. He pouts his upturned lips. The broad face is the same as always. His hair is unkempt, with a touch of gray. Taking a few ginger steps, he gently nods his head toward Ragan.

His new family can relate to him. Save for baby Bobby, they, too, are also former child stars. One was in the most recent version of Planet of the Apes. Another was in a popular Career Builder commercial. Ragan dubs them "The Hollywood Chimps."

When they argue, it's bitter. They squeal, poke, yell at one another, take sides. In seconds, they hug and make up.

While the others blow kisses, stomp and puff their chests, Bubbles stares and nods.

He is the sensitive one. He rarely starts a fight. If one occurs, he defers to Sam, a 40-year-old and oldest male of the group, to help quell the differences.

No one's ever seen Bubbles moonwalk -- they don't know if he still can. The chimpanzees love watching DVDs -- but Bubbles is never shown the "Dangerous" tour in Bucharest or the Leave Me Alone video, where he is seen riding an amusement park model plane with Jackson. The Chimps are more Jane Goodall buffs.

"Bubbles was obviously a well-loved chimp," Ragan said. "It is obvious that Michael Jackson took good care of him . . . But it's hard to say whether he inherited anything from Michael."

Except for one thing: If someone raises a camera, he'll turn and walk away.

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Like most chimps, Bubbles' rendezvous with fame was short. After they pass the age of 7, they grow too strong and too independent to be cajoled into performing tricks for treats.

They suffer the fall of a young celebrity whose gimmick goes stale. They become sideshow acts in unaccredited zoos or tools for breeders. And as the public becomes fascinated with newer, younger chimps, older ones can be left to endure invasive tests in the name of scientific query.

Apes at this sanctuary aren't used for research. The females are given Depo-Provera and the males receive vasectomies to prevent breeding. There are no indignities like species-bending outfits, cameras or pies in the face. There are just stuffed peppers with peanuts and cinnamon and socialization into a new group of primates just like them.

It's not always easy or consistent. Sometimes those animals will meld well, playing and laughing and giggling with others and then -- Ragan can see it -- they have this existential moment when they wonder, just how did life get to this?

Staff has never seen Bubbles in that crisis. He was about 3 years old when he left a cancer research lab and was given to the King of Pop. He had some small roles in commercials and television shows, but was mostly known as socialite -- traveling with the star to Japan and hobnobbing with Quincy Jones, Brooke Shields, Liza Minnelli and others.

When Jackson's children came along, he gave Bubbles -- by then, a teenager -- to Hollywood trainer Bob Dunn. In 2004, Dunn stopped training apes and donated the Hollywood Chimps to the west-central Florida sanctuary, one of 10 in North America.

Ragan, a Miami native, founded the nonprofit in 1993 after acting as foster parent to an orangutan who had a sick mom. Through the work, she became concerned about how showbiz apes live out the next 30 years of their lives. She searched throughout Florida for the perfect spot for the sanctuary before deciding on rural Wauchula.

The citrus groves, cow pastures and sweet air of the countryside give way to a tiny downtown, where country music is played through city-owned speakers on Main Street. This week, signs planted on green spaces advertised foreclosure relief and an upcoming concealed weapons class. The businesses are just starting to put up lettering indicating ``Se Habla Español."

The last time anyone could remember anyone on national television invoking the name of this 4,000-person city was in 1981, when two families discovered that a nearby hospital had mistakenly swapped their babies. Last week, the city found themselves being talked about on Anderson Cooper, The Today Show and The Colbert Report, courtesy of a resident most will never see.

"I didn't even remember he was even here until I saw him on TV," said Amye Mitchell, a 34-year-old, sixth-generation Wauchula resident and local waitress. "I thought how this is great publicity for us. It put some attention on a small-town . . . Most people don't even know where Wauchula's at. Or how to spell it."

When he arrived, Bubbles was undoubtedly the chimp with the highest profile. The center downplayed it. Until two weeks, Bubbles' biography only said that he was once in a music video.

In 2006, Richard Shepard, the local emergency management director, was taking a tour around the center when Ragan introduced them.

"Is that the Bubbles?"

"Yes," she said.

"It's sort of a well-kept secret here," Shepard recalled. "I bet six in 10 people in Wauchula don't know he's here."

The day 31 million people stopped their daily routines to watch Michael Jackson's memorial service on television, Bubbles -- who is an ape, not a monkey -- sat atop his balcony.

Bobby Stryker, the baby 5-year-old chimp with a white tuft on his back, climbed to sit with him. Then, he poked him. Bubbles tickled back, turning him around in a large red plastic bowl made of discarded parts of an old McDonald's Playland.

Ragan hasn't attempted to let Bubbles know that Michael Jackson, who had not seen the chimp in at least six years, has died.

"How do you expect me to explain it?" Ragan said. "I'm not sure if he would recognize the words 'Michael Jackson.' I'm sure it was a big part of his life when he was little because he got experiences most chimps don't get to have. But this was only a fifth of his life."