



Animal Magnetism

When the Maryland Zoo got into a fight for survival, it chose a veteran of the corporate jungle. By Christianna McCausland

When Elizabeth "Billie" Grieb was a partner at the Baltimore law firm of DLA Piper Rudnick Gray Cary, she regularly met with many big shots. In her capacity as the president and CEO of the Maryland Zoo, she still does. On this particular day, they are so big, they need to bow their heads to see Grieb on eye level.

That's because Grieb is feeding giraffes. Grieb, 55, looks every part the stylish, high-powered attorney she has been. She wears a spotless black coat, and a chic matching hat that shows the fringe of her blonde hair, to stave off the winter cold. She slips off a black glove, digs through a bucket of produce, selects a bit of carrot and proffers it to a 15-foot-tall giraffe named Angel. The animal dips her head down, sticks out her 18-inch-long tongue, and wraps it around Grieb's fingertips; in an instant, the carrot is gone.

"When the board approached me I said, 'You're crazy, I'm a lawyer, I can't run the zoo,'" says Grieb. "But the more we talked about it, I realized I might be able to give them exactly what they were looking for. Having been at the law firm for 25 years, I thought if I was ever going to do something else, this would be the right time. This has been my present to myself."

A native of Chestertown, Elizabeth has been known as "Billie" most of her life, a nickname she received from her mother. Prior to taking the top seat at the zoo, Grieb was a lawyer focused on real estate securities, business law, and mergers and acquisitions. She joined the zoo's board in 1994 (and became the president and CEO in 2002). It was her business know-how that appealed to the zoo's board of directors. "Billie's got tremendous guts to make tough decisions," says Michael Hankin, CEO of Brown Advisory, who has been on the zoo's board since 1990. "I think she's helped the zoo face up to challenges it had put off."

The Maryland Zoo, founded in 1876, celebrates its 130th birthday this year. It is the third oldest zoo in the country, behind Philadelphia and Cincinnati.

The zoo, which sits on about 180 acres, was created by an Act of the Maryland

Maryland Zoo CEO Billie Grieb: "It's about making that connection with an animal in a positive way."

General Assembly that called for “a zoological collection within the limits of Druid Hill Park for the purpose of public exhibition for the instruction and recreation of the people.” At that time, the zoo featured only 17 species (compared to the 200 of today); among them were bears, a tiger, 13 monkeys, and—according to one animal inventory—a three-legged duck. By 1947, it was rated one of the poorest and smallest zoos in the country—until its first permanent director, Arthur Watson, helped it regain public popularity.

Back then, zoos were built for human entertainment—not animal comfort, species preservation, or education. So while its Victorian roots may give the zoo architectural charm, it is a headache for modern-day maintenance. First, the approach to the care and display of animal collections has changed dramatically in 130 years. One need only look at the old site of the polar bear exhibit to see how times have changed; the former exhibit stands empty, its meager pool drained of water, a relic of a bygone era in zoo history. Polar bears Alaska and Magnet now frolic in the state-of-the-art Polar Bear Watch exhibit that has a larger pool and spacious play areas. In addition, the infrastructure of the zoo itself suffered with age: The plumbing needed to be replaced, people complained that the zoo was too spread out, and the animal habitats were old.

Those challenges caused the attraction to amass deferred maintenance costs on the 50-plus buildings on the zoo’s campus. Couple these troubles with threatened deep budget cuts from Annapolis, and the zoo was in a substantial predicament when Grieb took over.

“The state had cut our funding by \$700,000, so we were in a really serious financial crisis for a while,” Grieb recalls, adding that “the zoo handled financial shortfalls by deferring maintenance and not paying market salaries [to employees].”

The zoo is owned by the City of Baltimore, which leases the property to the State of Maryland. The state, in turn, leases the zoo to the Maryland Zoological Society. The zoo works on an

\$11 million operating budget and gets most of its funding from the state. The problem, according to Grieb, was that there was no long-range plan to deal with the challenges the zoo faced. The place needed discipline and basic organization in its management. As an example, she points out that prior to her coming on board, the zoo would still be working on its budget halfway through its fiscal year.

Now the attraction has the budget planned before the year begins. Her tactic was to reassess where money was being spent and to restore the state funding. “The zoo has been chronically under-funded,” says Grieb. “I really think

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it was a matter of not wanting to ask [for more funding].”

Grieb commanded the downsizing of the animal collection by 400 animals. Today, she downplays the uproar the cutbacks caused. “Most of the animals that went to other zoos were animals where we had more of the particular species than we wanted to keep in our collection at that time,” she explains. Grieb slimmed down the staff too, opting to have less staff that she could pay more. In addition, she instituted a “Quality of Life” committee that organizes events such as staff picnics and bowling outings to keep employees happy—and less likely to quit. “We’ve moved to a culture of transparency and respect for everyone who works at the zoo,” she says.

In recent history, the news coming out of the zoo was pretty grim: The media hubbub grew when it was announced that, because of fiscal constraints, the zoo’s two elephants were headed out of town. (They were retained when public outcry turned into

generous donations, with the remainder of money to save the pachyderms coming from state and city funds.)

But lately, there’s been a decidedly upbeat turn. In October 2005, the 20th annual ZooBOOO!, the zoo’s Halloween promotion, set a single-day attendance record for the event with 8,675 guests. The threatened state budget cuts never occurred. Penguin chicks arrived in the autumn, and there were two recent (albeit unsuccessful) attempts to artificially inseminate Dolly the elephant. Many attribute the renewed positive attitude that prevails at the zoo to Billie Grieb.

Grieb is described by her board members as smart with a sense of humor that puts people at ease. She has the ability to make one feel comfortable in her presence without ever dropping her polished professional exterior. “Billie is a very strong, effective leader who really believes in what the zoo does, but she also has a very pragmatic approach,” says Matthew Gallagher, the Mayor’s designated board member at the zoo. “She’s really zeroing in on what the zoo needs to do to be successful not just year to year, but in the long run.”

Like most of the staff at the zoo, Grieb is dedicated to her job. Her two children (and the three she shares with her husband Walter “Duke” Lohr) are grown. Aside from occasional trips to Rehoboth Beach and time spent reading novels at the Towson home she shares with Lohr and two dogs, Grieb is at the zoo. And she doesn’t just sit in her plush office in the Mansion House administration building; she enjoys getting outside and walking the zoo grounds, chatting to the keepers and, yes, feeding the giraffes.

Her post requires such dedication. The zoo is, essentially, a living museum. Unlike an art museum, where the curator can set the alarm and lock the doors at night, the zoo is always running, even when it is closed. While the zoo was closed to the public in January and February, it was carefully introducing baby chimpanzees from their nursery into the large exhibit hall they will call home. The polar bear Alaska was allowed to

create a den in hopes that she was pregnant, although those hopes proved incorrect—at least for this year (the den was dismantled).

The zoo is also involved in ongoing conservation efforts. Among its many honors, the zoo has helped save the Panamanian golden frog from extinction at the hands of an incurable fungal disease through Project Golden Frog. As keepers of the largest captive colony of black-footed penguins in North America, it is renowned for its work on avian malaria, research that aids the wild penguin population in South Africa.

“A zoo is like a small city in that it has all the same issues a small municipality might have,” says Karl Kranz, general curator at the zoo. “We have to deal with everything from making sure the bathrooms are working to making sure the animals are fed and all the various functions of a guest experience are fulfilled. There’s a lot that goes on that people don’t see, from cleaning to grounds upkeep.” Kranz points out that zoo work is labor-intensive work. In addition to making sure that the approximately 400,000 visitors who come to the zoo each year have a nice visit, there are 1,500 birds, mammals, amphibians, and reptiles. There is a horticultural staff and three veterinarians—just some of the 150 full-time employees at the zoo.

Animal care takes the biggest bite out of the zoo’s budget. The zoo commissary rivals any major restaurant operation, working every day to keep the zoo’s big appetites in check. Among other things, the menagerie goes through 200 pounds of apples, 500 pounds of fish, and over 300 tons of alfalfa, hay, and straw a year, not to mention a few unique items such as Gatorade (for the polar bears) and Flintstone chewable vitamins (for the chimps).

“The standards we use to care for animals is not static—it’s always changing, always improving, and we are dedicated to giving the collection the best possible care,” says Kranz. “As we better understand the physical needs, we’re always upgrading those. And when you have a zoo that’s old with a lot of old infrastructure, you’re always upgrading it.”

Grieb says now that the zoo is stable, it is beginning a period of measured growth. To address complaints that the zoo is too spread out, exhausting for parents pushing strollers, a new tramway is in construction. There is work afoot on two new buildings (a bird-holding facility and a food warehouse), as well as a new storm water filtration system. In the future there will be improved seating areas at the zoo’s center and an expanded elephant facility; the popular prairie dogs will move to fancier digs at the zoo’s epicenter. There are plans for rides and a new carousel. It’s an ambitious plan Grieb hopes to complete by 2008 or 2009.

Michael Hankin notes that the zoo currently has a “right-sized” budget—in other words, revenues are matching with

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expenses. What the attraction is working on now is marketing. There are more events for zoo members and the public planned for 2006, in addition to special celebrations for the 130th anniversary that kicked off on March 4. “We want to emphasize that this is a fun, family place and provide opportunities for visitors to really connect with the animals,” says Grieb. She hopes that a new hop-on, hop-off double-decker bus service operating out of the Inner Harbor will help connect the zoo to the waterfront’s coveted throngs of tourists.

The zoo is ramping up efforts to offer visitors more interactive experiences. Riding on the heels of last year’s successful exhibit, Parakeet Landing (at which visitors could feed the exotic birds), this year visitors will be able to feed the giraffes from a feeding platform.

“I grew up in the city and I’ve got kids

and it’s hard to imagine not having the zoo here because it’s benefited generations of Marylanders,” says Gallagher. “The zoo is a great asset both for the city and the State of Maryland. It’s not only a regional destination; it also has tremendous appeal for its educational programs.”

While many attractions are floundering as visitor volume declines, zoos are gaining in popularity. According to the American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA), which accredits the Maryland Zoo as well as its neighbor to the south, The National Aquarium, zoos around the country draw 142 million visitors each year—more than the NFL, NBA, and Major League Baseball combined. The AZA notes that a Pew Charitable Trust poll has the public ranking zoos and aquariums among “the most powerful and trusted sources on the environment today.”

“Zoos are a very good thing, and I don’t just say that because I’m here,” says Grieb. “I think that if we weren’t here, it would literally be the case that hundreds or thousands of area children would never see a live giraffe, or a live elephant, or a live polar bear. If you can’t experience live animals, it’s very hard to expect kids to care about the environment or even be nice to a dog on the street.”

Children are what make the zoo tick. That’s why Grieb’s favorite spot in the zoo is in the Kid’s Zone, where children can pet pigmy goats. “Pigmy goats are so cute and they are so sweet, and you see them with the littlest children,” says Grieb. “That’s what it’s all about, it’s about making that connection with a living animal in a positive way that I think starts the whole experience of building people who care about our natural world.”

Fifteen years ago, this may not have been the future Billie Grieb imagined for herself, but she wouldn’t want it any other way. She says trading her law firm’s timesheets for AZA Species Survival Plans was well worth it. “If I could just read, go to the beach, travel, and work at the zoo, that would be all I need,” says Grieb. “When someone calls me and says, ‘We had a baby chimp born last night,’ how cool is that?” **E**

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