

Sergey

by Jim Doherty

I didn't attend the funeral, but I sent a nice letter saying I approved of it.
Mark Twain

Fred strode into my office with an *I know something you don't know* look on his face.

"Good morning, Fred.!"

"It's a good morning because everyone reached here safely and on time. By the way, I've taken care of Sergey."

I had no idea what Fred was talking about. Sergey was not any animal I remembered; he certainly was not one of our zookeepers.

"Okay, Fred, refresh my memory. Who's Sergey?"

Fred, one of our animal department supervisors, was at his best when dealing with people or animals. One of his many responsibilities was to be in his office before the keepers arrived to give each one his or her assignment and instructions for the day.

Fred was always at his office in the Lion House early. It was still dark that cold winter morning but he recognized the mound of sleeping sea lions he passed on his way to his office.

After a rainstorm and rapidly dropping temperatures the previous evening, the wide granite steps leading to Fred's office were coated with a half-inch thick layer of invisible ice. It was the ice that's unnoticed until its too late.

Fred reached his office without falling, but that was no guarantee that the keepers following him would do the same. Our animal care staffing

requirements could not afford lost time for falls on icy steps. Zoo keeping had enough potential hazards without adding to the list.

If this ice storm hadn't arrived so early in the winter, there'd have been a barrel of sand outside Fred's office for scattering on icy steps and pathways. However, the Maintenance Department had not delivered the barrel. Fred, aware of the icy conditions, knew it was too early in the day to receive a sand delivery.

Fred told me how he searched the entire Lion House for anything to scatter on the ice-coated steps. As an environmental organization, salt and chemicals were not an option for us. While probing the shelves in the large closet in his office, he spotted a silvery paint can with an envelope taped to it. Unable to remember what it was, he pulled the dusty can from its resting place. A letter in the envelope brought back memories of a long forgotten event.

Years earlier, Vinnie, senior keeper in charge of the Rare Animal Range Exhibits, was driving his cart on a service road that paralleled the western border of the zoo. An eight-foot high chain-link fence separated the zoo from a busy boulevard. In the middle of the pathway was a silvery can tossed over the fence, like other trash occasionally disposed of this way, by some of our neighbors. Vinnie read the letter taped to the can:

"This can contains the ashes of Sergey, once a Russian sailor. Sergey loved the zoo and visited many times during his retirement years. His last wish was to have his ashes scattered in the zoo."

Vinnie's electric cart was now a hearse as he delivered Sergey's ashes to the supervisor's office.

Fred knew the zoo's policy was to turn down these requests. I wonder how many people have scattered ashes of a loved one or friend in the zoo without formal approval.

It was different this time, however. The person's remains were in Fred's hands. Unsure of what to do, the can and the letter were pushed into the corner of a high shelf in the supervisor's closet for someone else to deal with at another time.

After reading the letter years later, Fred remembered how icy steps and walkways were once treated in the Northeast. With little access to sand or chemicals, the ashes from the wood and coal burned in furnaces were saved for scattering on the ice.

Fred again had Sergey's ashes in his hands. This early winter storm created a desperate situation needing immediate attention if he was to prevent slips and falls outside his office. He knew how to fulfill Sergey's last wish and at

the same time have the Russian sailor provide a valuable service for the zoo and its zookeepers.

There were no slips or falls outside the supervisor's office that morning.

Thank you Sergey and rest in peace.



I am Jim Doherty. After college and two years as a Peace Corps Volunteer, I began my thirty-eight year zoo career. It was just after I began working as a keeper at the San Francisco Zoo and before moving to New York that Elsie and I married. Safety is always an issue for management in any endeavor. It is a primary interest for those working in a zoo: safety for guests visiting the zoo; safety for those trained to care for wild and potentially dangerous animals; safety for the wellbeing of often irreplaceable wild animals. These are all concerns that I have not missed in retirement.