



# ALL THE KING'S MEN

CHIMPANZEES TORE **ANDREW OBERLE** APART. WITH HELP FROM AN ARMY OF FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND DOCTORS AT SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL, HE PUT HIMSELF BACK TOGETHER. BY WILLIAM POWELL





**YOUNG ZOOKEEPER ANDREW** Oberle extends a pole topped with a tennis ball toward Tumbo, a 5,500-pound hippopotamus. He says, “Target,” touching the ball to the behemoth’s nose. Then Oberle gives Tumbo an apple and hits a clicker, which the hippo recognizes as a “good boy” reinforcement. He repeats the cycle, giving Tumbo a chance to pick up on the pattern. Next, he moves the pole a few feet from Tumbo’s face, again says “Target,” and hopes that the hippo will bring his nose to the ball. If he does, Oberle gives him another treat and increases the distance for the next attempt. If not, they start over.

This lesson, like all training at the San Antonio Zoo, is intended to make the animal’s life easier and safer. For instance, if Tumbo were to cut his leg, a target against the glass of his enclosure would bring him close enough that the vet could take a good look. Working with a group of the zoo’s capuchin monkeys, Oberle trains them to sit still on a scale. Weighing animals regularly is a good way to monitor their health (and to tell whether they might be pregnant), a task made easier for both trainers and monkeys when it doesn’t require darting and bagging them.

Oberle is working at the zoo while studying for his master’s in anthropology and primatology at the University of Texas–San Antonio. He decided on a career involving monkeys as a grade-schooler in St. Louis, when his teacher told the class about Jane Goodall, the trailblazing researcher who spent decades with wild chimpanzees in Tanzania. As a teen, Oberle spent his summers as a counselor at the Saint Louis Zoo’s summer camp. He even has a tattoo of the zoo’s symbol, a lesser kudu. As an undergraduate at St. Mary’s University in San Antonio, he studied abroad in Hawaii, where he persuaded a professor to let him help with a chimpanzee study at the local zoo rather than doing his homework. Oberle sat with a notebook and watched the chimps during meals, recording social behaviors associated with their eating habits.



Plastic surgeon Bruce Kraemer led the team of doctors that spent years reconstructing Oberle’s body.



If not for hospital administrator Helen Sandkuhl, Oberle might never have made it to SLU.

In San Antonio, Oberle wows his roommates, married couple Anthony and Misa Reimherr, with the tricks he teaches his dog, Angie, a precocious mutt he adopted from the humane society and named after the Rolling Stones song. For her show-stopping stunt, Oberle points an imaginary gun and says, “Stick ’em up,” and Angie puts her front paws in the air. Then he says, “Bang,” and she plays dead. Photos of the animals he’s worked with hang on his bedroom walls, next to paintings done by monkeys and okapis. His bookshelf is lined with texts on primates: *Animal Tool Behavior*, *Primate Behavioral Ecology*, *Chimpanzee Politics*.

This summer, he’ll put all he’s learned to the test in South Africa, where he’ll work at the Jane Goodall Institute’s Chimp Eden, a sanctuary for rescued chimpanzees, many of which have been abused by humans. All these years after telling his mom, Mary Flint, that he wanted to work with monkeys, Oberle will take a giant, international step toward his dream job as a primatologist.

**A**ROUND 1 P.M. on June 28, 2012, Annie Coogan is sitting in a meeting when her phone rings. She doesn’t recognize the international number. The man on the other end identifies himself as Eugene Cussons, director of Chimp Eden. He tells Coogan that her nephew has had an accident and is hurt and that he needs to get in touch with his parents. Cussons doesn’t go into detail, but Coogan figures that if he’s calling from South Africa, it must be bad.

She calls her brother Andrew Oberle Sr., but he doesn’t pick up. She calls again. And again. And again. Finally, he answers. “You need to get a hold of Mary,” Annie Coogan tells her brother. “Andy’s been hurt.”

Several hours later, the elder Oberle calls back. He tells Coogan that “Little Andy” has been attacked by chimps.

In San Antonio, Anthony Reimherr’s phone rings, too. It’s Flint, frantic. Andy’s had an accident, he’s in a hospital in a town called Nelspruit, and he needs help. Reimherr tells his boss he needs to go, drives home, and starts calling his family.



**DURING HIS RECOVERY, OBERLE HAS BECOME AN UNOFFICIAL SPOKESMAN FOR THE SINCERIOUSLY CAMPAIGN, STARTED BY STEPHEN AMELL, THE STAR OF HIS FAVORITE SHOW, ARROW. “I’M LIVING MY RECOVERY SINCERIOUSLY,” HE SAYS. “I’M DOING IT AS HONESTLY AND AS EXPRESSIVELY AS I CAN WHILE TRYING TO SPREAD THAT POSITIVITY THAT I HAVE IN MYSELF TO OTHERS.”**

He’d met Oberle at St. Mary’s, where they became best friends after pledging the same fraternity. When Reimherr married his college sweetheart and bought a house, Oberle moved in with them. He helped with the bills and was just a good guy to have around, always upbeat. Their porch was falling apart, in shambles, but an overhaul wasn’t in the budget. Oberle said they could do the work themselves; Reimherr, who’s “not into manual labor,” wasn’t so sure. They went to a hardware store together and bought a nail gun and a power saw. They took measurements and cut boards. Within three weeks, Oberle had rebuilt the whole porch. For holidays, Oberle sometimes couldn’t afford to go home, so he’d tag along with Reimherr. Anthony’s parents, Mike and Nancy Reimherr,

view Oberle as another son, and Oberle calls them his second family.

Now, with him fighting for his life half a world away, the Reimherrs brainstorm ways to do something—anything—to ease the feeling of helplessness. They know that money is tight for Oberle’s family, so they set up a website to accept donations. Anthony has just passed the CPA exam and Misa has finished her master’s, and they have a party planned at his parents’ house to celebrate. They turn the event into a fundraiser for Oberle, asking

guests to make a donation in lieu of buying gifts. Word about the event spreads, and a television reporter shows up, interviewing Anthony and Misa and Angie, whom the younger Reimherrs are dogsitting while Oberle is abroad.

From there, the media attention snowballs, with Anthony doing a string of interviews, always directing people to the funding site. Soon, donations pour in from all over the globe. Oberle’s friends from the San Antonio Zoo help the Reimherrs organize another fundraiser at a local bar. Businesses donate merchandise for a raffle, and

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