

Life With Cheeta the Chimp

In a peaceful California sanctuary, the former film star is well cared for and loved

By [John Stark](#)

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Dan Westfall and Cheeta (the cage is for Dan's birds, not for Cheeta)

Credit: Courtesy of Dan Westfall

The late Hollywood animal trainer Tony Gentry put it in his will that when he died, his best friend, Jiggs, who he lived with and took care of for decades, was to be euthanized. Jiggs was better known to the public as Cheeta, Johnny Weissmuller's comic sidekick in the *Tarzan* films of the 1930s and 40s. Or at least one of the Cheetas, as several were cast per movie.

Gentry knew, having trained and worked with movie animals, the suffering they can endure when they get too old to perform. Although Gentry was known to his friends and relatives as a “cussing, crusty character,” he was respected for his love of animals. He couldn’t bear to know that Cheeta could wind up living his golden years in a roadside zoo, made to work again, whipped and beaten for not obeying orders, or used for medical experiments.



Credit: Courtesy of Dan Westfall
Cheeta

Dan Westfall, an animal trainer himself, continually begged his older Uncle Tony to not euthanize Cheeta, but to let him come live with him in Palm Springs, Calif.

“For a long time Uncle Tony wouldn’t change his mind,” says Westfall, 74, who lives alone, and whose house has been a refuge for unwanted pets for the past 50 years. “Two months before he died in 1992, Uncle Tony had a change of heart. He called and told me to come get Cheeta. It was an emotional parting. Uncle Tony was crying. I was crying. Cheeta was crying.”

Cheeta has lived with Westfall for 30 years. According to [Jane Goodall](#), the world’s leading chimpanzee expert, “chimps can live to the age of forty in the wild, and over sixty in captivity.”

The Guinness Book of Records lists Cheeta as the world’s oldest chimp: 84 years. But Westfall isn’t so sure about that. He thinks Cheeta is more likely in his 70s.

His birthplace is a mystery, too. Uncle Tony told Westfall that Cheeta was taken as a baby from Liberia. But Westfall doesn’t have proof. “In the ’20s, ’30s and ’40s, Hollywood paid big

game hunters to go to Africa and steal baby chimps. They slaughtered whole tribes of chimps, the parents, aunts and uncles, all of whom were fighting to save their babies,” he says.

Cheeta's Favorite Things

Westfall feeds Cheeta his breakfast, lunch and dinner at the kitchen table in his house. The menu usually consists of monkey chow, vegetables, sweet potatoes and fruits. His favorite foods are spaghetti, Big Macs and burritos. Cheeta uses his fingers and opposable thumbs to pick up drinking glasses, knives and forks.

“I groom Cheeta, check his teeth and clip his nails,” Westfall says. “He lets me do anything with him. No one assists me. I give him hot tea at bedtime. I have a baby monitor near his bed.”

Because Cheeta is now diabetic, Westfall checks the chimp's blood levels three times a day and gives him twice-daily insulin injections. He also gives him fish oil capsules and turmeric for inflammation, and CBD drops and Meloxicam for arthritis.

“I think Dan is a sainted soul, a very special man” says Diane Weissmuller, Johnny Weissmuller's daughter-in-law. She's known Westfall and Cheeta for decades.

“Dan's house is as neat as a pin,” she says. “There are no animal smells whatsoever. He is just one of those people you meet who leaves a lasting impression. He's a happy fellow. He doesn't ask for more in life.”

Last Thanksgiving, Weissmuller says she brought Thanksgiving dinner to Cheeta.

“He kissed me on the foot,” she says. “He lets my grown son, Chad, pet him on the back before turning over to be petted on his stomach. Even though Cheeta has known us for years, and we love him, Dan never lets his sight off of him. Dan is always in control of him.”

Casa de Cheeta

Westfall says he learned how to put together a chimp act from his Uncle Tony. For two years, Westfall had an act called the Marquis Chimps that performed at the historic Palace Theater in Palm Springs. Although Cheeta was not in the act, his grandson, Jeeter, was. Jeeter is still alive and has lived with his grandfather and Westfall for 30 years. The other performing chimp was named Suzie, who died 21 years ago.

“My chimps were never made to go on stage if they didn’t want to,” says Westfall. “Suzie was such a ham she couldn’t wait to get into the car to perform. She loved the attention.” Suzie can be seen driving a golf cart with Jackie Gleason in the 1969 movie comedy, *How to Commit Marriage*.

In 2006, Westfall established his Palm Springs residence as a nonprofit ape sanctuary called [C.H.E.E.T.A.](#): the initials stand for Creative Habitats and Enrichment for Endangered and Threatened Apes.

A sign in front of the sanctuary says Casa de Cheeta. “I figured if Liberace could have a plaque in front of his house saying ‘Casa de Liberace,’ then so could Cheeta,” says Westfall.

Cheeta lives in a spacious 1,200-square-foot enclosure that’s attached to the back of Westfall’s mid-century house. The sanctuary is licensed by the City of Palm Springs, the State of California, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the USDA; the latter three conduct unannounced yearly inspections.

Like other Palm Springs celebrities, Cheeta has a star embedded on the Palm Springs Walk of fame. Westfall has one, too, emphasizing his devotion to Cheeta’s care and well-being.

Westfall is no longer a young primate himself. For that reason, he can no longer take in any more great apes and monkeys. Still, he does have two dogs aged 11 and 12, and four parrots, ranging in age from 20 to 50. The oldest one can no longer fly; Westfall dutifully feeds and takes care of him.

Chimpanzees Are Close to Man

Cheeta, despite his age and diminished energy, is no celebrity recluse. You can book a visit with him through the sanctuary’s [website](#). You can talk to Cheeta through the bars of his enclosure and even take photos, but visitors are not allowed to touch him.

“We think chimps are cute and funny. But chimps have six to eight times the strength of humans,” Westfall says. “They could break your fingers by just clutching them.

“Chimpanzees are the closest animal to man,” continues Westfall. “They carry 98 percent of human DNA. Their blood and our blood can be interchangeable. Mothers spend five to ten years raising their young.”

According to Goodall, “The only thing that really separates humans from chimpanzees is our sophisticated language.”

Sadly, Cheeta no longer has the strength to climb the bars of his jungle gym, but he now does acrylic brush paintings. His abstracts have been sold around the world for as much as \$10,000, and have been on display at London’s National Gallery. Even Steven Spielberg has an original. (They are available on the sanctuary website for a \$140 donation.)

Like any big star, Cheeta is not without tabloid-worthy controversy. In 2012, a Florida primate sanctuary announced the death of a chimp who was named Cheetah with an ‘h.’ The sanctuary had been promoting him as being Weissmuller’s sidekick. Newspapers around the world carried the story. The public went ape over the loss of an animal who once brought them so much joy. The sanctuary claimed that its Cheetah was given by Johnny Weissmuller himself.

“Don’t get my blood boiling,” says Diane Weissmuller. “My father-in-law never gave anyone a chimp. In fact, he wasn’t all that fond of them.”

‘I Need Them for My Soul’

In 2006, at Westfall’s invitation, Goodall visited Westfall’s sanctuary and brought Cheeta a stuffed monkey. After her visit, she wrote on her website: “This makes me feel like the world is still filled with people whose intents are wonderful and good.”

“I care for animals because they need me and I need them for my soul,” says Westfall. “Whenever I lose one of them, I’m devastated. I had a tarantula named Elvira for seventeen years. She died a few weeks ago. I’m starting to cry now just thinking of her. She was very gentle. After she passed on, I kissed her goodbye and buried her in my back yard.”

Westfall is proud of his lifelong devotion to animals, loving and taking care of them no matter how old they become.

“I don’t know why. I guess everybody has something that they’re assigned to do in life,” says Westfall.



By [John Stark](#)

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