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# The Washington Post

## **Nim Chimpsky: A Life That Was Rich Beyond Words; [FINAL Edition]**

[Laura Ann Petitto](#). [The Washington Post](#). Washington, D.C.: [Mar 18, 2000](#). pg. C.01

**Abstract (Summary)**

We humans have talked to our animals for centuries and, in the last one, we even tried to teach them to talk to us. On March 10, one of the scientific world's most famous "talking animals" passed away. **Nim Chimpsky**, a 26-year-old male chimpanzee, died of a heart attack at the Black Beauty Ranch near Tyler, Tex.

In many ways, I was the closest thing Nim had to a "mother," and thus news of Nim's death brought swift condolences from my colleagues around the world in the scientific community. Knowing exactly how to react has been less clear. How does a community mourn the death of a chimpanzee?

I first learned that Nim had died early this week while I was playing with my 3-year-old daughter. If I had but a second alone, I would have been better able to hide my shock and the tears. But she saw me. Worse, she heard my sigh: "Nim's dead." And what turmoil ensued. I had forgotten that in my house, all three of my young daughters affectionately refer to Nim--whose photos are everywhere--as their "brother."

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We humans have talked to our animals for centuries and, in the last one, we even tried to teach them to talk to us. On March 10, one of the scientific world's most famous "talking animals" passed away. Nim Chimpsky, a 26-year-old male chimpanzee, died of a heart attack at the Black Beauty Ranch near Tyler, Tex.

Nim had spent much of his adult life there, but when he was a baby, he lived with me. I raised him like a human child and taught him American Sign Language in a pioneering experiment into the nature of

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the essence of language.

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"My brother is dead, my brother is dead!" Maaraluisa sobbed, then collapsed into my arms.

I was mortified. How could I undo this? How do I explain who and what this chimp really was, especially when the very nature of chimpanzees defies our everyday classification of the world. Chimpanzees are fascinating but paradoxical beings because they are different from the categories we humans understand best: pets and children. They are not like cats and dogs; their social and intelligent behaviors are closer on the continuum to those of humans. Yet they are not exactly like human children either. Chimpanzees are lone members of their own special kind. Because of this, the emotions that their lives--and their deaths--evoke are unique, and singularly powerful.

I didn't know to expect this when I, a psychology student, first showed up for a research job interview at Columbia University in the mid-'70s. At first, no one answered the door. As I turned to walk away, a breathless man swung it open. A stiff finger at his lips, he commanded me to "shush," and gestured that I follow him through the first chamber of his office to a second closed door.

There were screams--eerie, inhuman cries. "What is that?" I wanted to ask. But there was no time. He opened the door and pushed me in, closing it behind me. There, on the floor, with teeth bared and hair erect, was a young chimpanzee--obviously male and obviously about to attack me. Reflexively, I turned my back and fell to the floor. Silence. Without knowing it, I had exhibited a classic submission gesture of a chimp, and I had broken the attack. Pulling my head to his mouth, the chimpanzee began to rip through my hair--amazingly, he was grooming me. A moment later, through a video system attached to a wall came the muffled words, "You're on the project!"

And so began my journey with Nim Chimpsky. The experiment was called "Project Nim Chimpsky," named after the famous linguist Noam Chomsky, and was directed by Columbia psychology professors Herbert S. Terrace and Thomas Bever. Nim and I moved into a plantation-style, 37-room mansion, with--to my delight--11 bathrooms, on 13 acres in Riverdale, N.Y., an estate donated to Columbia for research. I was to raise him and fill his world with happy play--and language. The project was thrilling and timely.

Noam Chomsky had already published his devastating critique of B.F. Skinner's "Verbal Behavior," in which Chomsky demonstrated that

human language was far too complex to have been learned entirely from environmental input using Skinner's "reinforcement" and "imitation" principles. Further, the biologist Eric Lenneberg had published his landmark book, "Biological Foundations of Language," in which he argued that language was a product of the human brain.

Throughout university lecture halls around the nation, everyone was talking about "the critical test": If parts of natural language spring from our distinctly human biological makeup, then it should not be possible to teach these parts to other animals, even our nearest relative, the chimpanzee. On the other hand, if language is a general communicative system that we share with all living animals, it should be entirely "teachable" to chimps.

To top this off, [University of Oklahoma](#) researchers Alan and Beatrice Gardner had already begun to test these ideas, and claimed that their chimpanzee, Washoe, had produced signs.

The scientific community needed to know if their results could be expanded and replicated. Excited by the scientific questions of the time, I was going to "talk to the animals."

Living with Nim was as thrilling as the project. Like us, each chimp has its own personality, which is felt in the gut by all who have ever sat eye to eye with them or breathed in their breath. Nim was quick as a whip, yet he loved a good time. A prankster at heart, he played his jokes always with a dare: He'd wait by the garbage pail until he had my eye, then fling down its content. He'd hide things I urgently needed: He'd gag in laughter on top of the refrigerator as I, below, frantically looked for what I thought I had misplaced: the pot, the spoon or even the entire ingredients of the night's dinner!

And I was the first one he sought in a pinch: Goodness, was he ever so happy to see me the night that he broke into a neighbor's house and was about to be dragged off by the New York City police! He loved being with me, and being like me in ways I now see echoed in my own children: He had a thing for wearing my shoes and my hats. And when fear from a late-night thunderstorm wracked him to the core, I'd awaken to find him sitting on my chest.

Yes, this extraordinary being and I lived our ordinary lives together, as we ate, played and ran through the woods. Nim and I learned much in those early years, and he communicated through it all in rich ways. But ultimately, he mastered only some, not all, of human language, and we humans told the world about this. He taught us that parts of this remarkable thing we call language is special to humans.

So did Nim fail? No, he was one of science's great successes: He informed all chimp studies that followed to focus on the richness of chimpanzees' own communicative system rather than on drilling them in our own tongue. And Nim's successes laid the foundation for the truly exciting chimpanzee research of today, showing us that chimps can provide an exciting glimpse of the evolutionary precursors of human language.

In the end, I had to tell my 3-year-old daughter this: No, Nim is not your brother. No, he's not like our neighbor's cat. No, he's not like your two sisters. But it's okay to feel sad--because his was a "life," one that contributed greatly to our understanding of him, a chimpanzee, and, because of this, we better understand the secrets of being human.

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