



## GIGI, THE SQUIRREL

By Alicia Eastham, Staff

You know, there are not too many places a grown man could send half a dozen emails, complete with picture attachments, detailing his three-year love affair with a squirrel named Gigi and not be greeted with a few raised eyebrows. Particularly if the email ends with a heartfelt plea for extensive facial surgery and post-op care for said squirrel. Which is why Frank was so lucky to find Second Chance Wildlife Center.

There were no raised eyebrows, just nodding heads as the emails were circulated around the Center and word was put out to the entire staff. The hard copies of the emails were accompanied with a sticky note from our founder and director, Chris. “This guy will be coming in with his squirrel in a Hav-a-Heart trap,” said the note. “He’s not a nut.”

Ok then. We all waited for Frank and his little friend to arrive and prepared for what looked like a fairly involved case. We had a cage ready in a quiet spot, we had bedding, and we had Polly ready to field Frank’s questions and concerns. We thought we were good to go. What we should have prepared (and I realized this only in retrospect) were reinforced doors, bulletproof glass and a padded cell.

As we waited we all read and re-read the emails Frank sent as well as Chris’ responses. It seems that Frank had a number of what we in the business call “backyard pets.” These are wild animals that people develop an attachment to after many days of feeding and observing them. One of his backyard pets was an adult female squirrel he nicknamed Gigi, which is short for the unfortunate moniker, Goiter Girl. Gigi had been sporting a large and cumbersome growth on her neck, which Frank has watched develop with growing horror. Finally, it got to the point where he could bear it no longer and he sought medical help for his furry friend, which, of course, brought him to us.

Upon arrival, Frank was greeted by our clinical and office staff and Gigi was quickly examined then allowed to rest. Within days, Gigi was treated by a vet who diagnosed her with having an impressive abscess, a diagnosis first suggested by Chris when she saw the pictures that Frank had sent us. We were amazed at the size of the infectious growth and the fact that it had not ruptured and drained naturally by now. Readers, I shall spare you the gory details of the operation. Suffice it to say- poor Gigi was relieved of a whole lot of weight, which we promptly reinserted in the form of gauze, antibiotics and a drainage tube. Over the course of the next week or so, the clinical staff all got to come face to face with Gigi and her slowly healing surgical wound at least twice a day. Her cringe-inducing wound right below her chin and her sad little whimpers broke all our hearts. We all sympathized with her and marveled over



*Gigi's heartbreaking before photo.*

how well she handled us pulling her out of her cage and sticking her with injections and treating her wound. There was a second round of collective nodding. She was a very patient and sweet squirrel indeed.

Boy, were we wrong. Gigi was not a patient squirrel; she was a heavily sedated squirrel. As soon as she started to feel better, her sad little whimpers turned into big healthy snarls. Gigi was feeling better and she was having none of this coddling. She wanted out in a big, big way. She made that sentiment clear one night by breaking out of her cage and the Quiet Room upstairs and hiding out somewhere in the building. The staff noticed her empty cage during the morning walk-through, when we check on all our patients briefly. The house was turned upside down in the search. Doors were blocked and barricades put up in the halls, staff roamed the floors like large hairless bloodhounds and the Center was generally in an uproar. Eventually she was found hiding out in the surgery room, of all places. She was promptly returned to her cage, admonished, and fed a small mountain of peanuts.

This great escape, though inconvenient, did give us a chance to see her in action, so to speak. Gigi was feeling good enough to break out of her cage, run circles around us and elude capture for the better part of a day, which meant that she was nearing her release. With fingers crossed, we continued to update Frank regarding her progress as well as her antics. Frank had become a fixture around the center, first coming by to feed baby squirrels, then signing on as a volunteer. He took great pleasure in watching Gigi grow stronger, even though it meant she was not nearly as “sweet” as she was when she was incapacitated. Her feisty attitude was reassuring to all of us in fact, because it meant that she was on her way out of here.

One Sunday morning, a couple of weeks after the great escape, I was hurrying around the Center trying to get babies fed, patients medicated and cages cleaned. I had a full staff of volunteers helping me and things appeared to be going smoothly, despite the fact that there was Board of Directors Meeting scheduled for the day, which tends to tie up Chris for most of the afternoon. The meeting also meant that I needed to have the conference room cleaned out and made ready for our Board by noon. As I directed cleaning efforts Chris breezed in and told me that Frank would be joining us for our meeting today, to learn more about our operations in order to help us with some fundraising. Knowing he would want to check in on Gigi whenever he arrived, I went to the Quiet Room to double check on her, which is when I noticed her tray had been pushed out from the inside and there was a squirrel shaped hole in the screen covering the window from the outside. This was not good. The window was cracked open and had been left like that overnight to keep the room ventilated. Not good at all. I launched a search party in the desperate hope that Gigi had not squirmed her way through that slender crack, chewed through the screen, crawled onto the roof and leapt to freedom.

It was no use. Gigi had set her own release date and it had come and gone. We were just happy she gave us enough time to fully treat the wound and give her a full round of antibiotics. Truth be told, we would have preferred to give her a few more days to rest up but apparently, we were vetoed on that matter. There was a sighting that afternoon high up in a tree in front of the house which resulted in two staff people (I will never tell who) with binoculars wandering precariously on the roof of the house, but it was a false one. Thankfully, Frank, who had arrived during the search for her that morning, understood that Gigi knew best and her choice of the property that we sit on as a release site may have been very wise. All’s well that ends well and considering she never would have survived in the wild with that massive growth on her neck, we thought this patient tale ended pretty well. Frank must have understood. Why else would he be signing on as our newest Board Member?

Reprinted from "Second Thoughts" newsletter- Spring 2007.  
Copyright 2007 - Second Chance Wildlife Center, Inc.

**Post Script, 23 September 2008:** That following fall, after Gigi's daring escape, I went to our storage barn to look for more squirrel cages when I happened upon an adult squirrel in the barn's doorway. As the squirrel let me get closer, I realized she was a lactating female. I also realized she was Gigi. With a patch of short fur where her growth used to be, it was quite obvious who she was. It was also quite obvious that she had settled into her own little niche behind our outdoor raccoon quarters, where there are abundant raspberry bushes and walnut trees. I still see Gigi every now and again on my treks to the barn, much to the utter delight of Frank, who makes sure that I keep him posted of her activities.

~Brittany Davis, Staff