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'People ... loved this creature'

Thousands mourn zoo's famous gorilla

The big fella's soul may rest in heaven, but there was plenty of evidence Saturday that an enduring piece of it will never leave Atlanta. In a memorial service as majestic as he, Atlanta's most famous gorilla, Willie B., was remembered fondly, and tearfully, for his legacy to Zoo Atlanta and the city.

The service, in a tent filled to overflowing by an estimated 2,500 -- many others watched the service on remote televisions around the zoo complex -- was dignified and joyful by any standards.

"A lot of people around Atlanta, around the South, around America, maybe even the entire world and the universe loved this creature," Zoo Atlanta director Dr. Terry Maple said of Willie B., who died in his sleep Wednesday at age 41 after a bout with pneumonia.

In his 38 years of living at the zoo, Willie B., named after former Atlanta Mayor William B. Hartsfield, became its most famous, even regal, inhabitant, known for his stoic presence and curious gaze that implied he knew more about visitors than they knew about themselves.

Former Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young said the 6-foot, 400-pound lowland gorilla left a legacy of compassion, and, oddly, human understanding.

During Young's administration, the zoo was refurbished and Willie B. finally was allowed to roam an outdoor habitat after 28 years of being cooped in a cage with a TV set.

"We were moved to set him free, and perhaps in so doing we set ourselves free," said Young. "And could learn that we can all live together with all the animals that God created."

Young, and several of the eight speakers at the service, retold funny stories about the gorilla.

The last time Young saw Willie, he said, "He made eyes at my wife, and I was so glad there was a (cage) partition there, because I didn't want to have to slug him."

State Rep. Nan Grogan Orrock of Atlanta said a resolution commemorating Willie B. was read in the state House of Representatives Friday.

"He was part of the interconnected web of life," said Orrock.

Robert C. Petty, vice chairman of the Board of Zoo Atlanta, quipped that Willie B. had profoundly influenced the zoo, especially its robust director, Maple.

"In addition to a striking physical resemblance," said Petty, "Terry was inspired by Willie B.'s leadership qualities."

After the approximately hourlong service, members of the Atlanta Youth Chorus led the gathering outside the gates of the zoo while singing an African march song.

The zoo started a fund-raising drive to commission a life-sized bronze statue of Willie that will be erected outside the gorilla habitat.

Maple said plans are to sprinkle the gorilla's ashes over his home country of Cameroon, probably in June, if the zoo can raise the funds. "We borrowed him from Africa 39 years ago, and he will be returned there," said Maple to applause.

Angela Black, 43, a Stone Mountain nurse, said she had visited Willie B. many times at the zoo in her 11 years of living here.

The thought of missing his funeral was unthinkable. "I know that's an ape," she said after the service. "But Lord knows he felt like a family member."

Photo: Zoo Atlanta director Dr. Terry Maple speaks during a memorial service Saturday for Willie B., who became an icon in Atlanta. / ERIK S. LESSER / Associated Press

Photo: A celebration of the life of Willie B.: Visitors such as Renee Sudderth of Stone Mountain (above) used pens and markers Saturday to write their sentiments about Willie B. and many left flowers and stuffed animals. / CHARLOTTE B. TEAGLE / Staff

Photo: Peppermint Owens (left) of Atlanta wipes tears from her eyes outside a big white tent that was filled with mourners for Zoo Atlanta's famous gorilla. / CHARLOTTE B. TEAGLE / Staff