



# NEWS RELEASE

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## SANTA BARBARA ZOO'S ASIAN ELEPHANT LITTLE MAC NOW RECEIVING HOSPICE CARE

*Zoo and VNA Health Provide Staff and Guests with Grief Guidance*

*Santa Barbara, CA, September 24, 2019* – Little Mac, the Santa Barbara Zoo's 48-year-old Asian elephant, now receives what zoo officials call hospice care following a sharp decline in her physical condition over the past two weeks.

She has suffered from intermittent gastrointestinal issues since a bout of colic in mid-June, and has lost weight. She has exhibited lowered activity levels, less engagement with training, and a loss of appetite. Last week, tests detected blood in Little Mac's boli (dung), which she is being treated for. She also receives treatments for several ongoing medical conditions common in geriatric elephants, such as chronic arthritis.

After exhausting treatment options, she is being kept comfortable for as long as possible. Little Mac's hospice care includes treating her symptoms, providing her with drugs to increase her comfort, and engaging her with her usual training, if she chooses.

"Just as with a beloved family member, we needed to take time to explore all options and make the best possible decision," said Zoo President/CEO Rich Block. "This is certainly not the outcome we had hoped for or have worked toward. It is time to start considering euthanasia as a compassionate and respectful option for her. We've gone public about this to allow all of us to begin to cope with her passing."

The Zoo has asked VNA Health (formerly Visiting Nurse & Hospice Care) to provide guidance for Zoo staff and guests in dealing with anticipatory grief, similar to that experienced by families with a loved one in hospice care. This includes a session with Zoo staff and a blog posting on the Zoo's website about bereavement ([www.sbzoo.org/loss](http://www.sbzoo.org/loss)) of loved ones and even pets and Zoo animals.

Donations in Little Mac's memory can be made to the International Elephant Foundation ([www.elephantconservation.org](http://www.elephantconservation.org)) or to the Zoo's [Toys4Animals Amazon Wish List](#). Gifts of organic, pesticide-free tree trimmings and branches are also welcome ([www.sbzoo.org/support/browse](http://www.sbzoo.org/support/browse)).

### Little Mac's Recent History

Little Mac has lived at the Santa Barbara Zoo since 1972. She has been the Zoo's sole Asian elephant following the death of her companion, a 47-year-old Asian elephant named Sujatha (pronounced sue-JAW-tha), on October 16, 2018.

An Asian elephant is considered geriatric around age 40. At 48, Little Mac has exceeded the median life expectancy for Asian elephants in human care, which is 46.9 years. That means that half the animals live less than 46.9 years, and half live longer.

A behavioral study was recently conducted to help determine Little Mac's future. Her options included to remain at her Zoo home of 46 years with keepers and an environment she knew, or to be moved to a different facility or sanctuary to be introduced to other Asian elephants.



“Little Mac initially was doing very well and showing good behavioral indicators of coping well with being on her own,” says Dr. Julie Barnes, the Zoo's director of animal care and health. “Unfortunately, we have been grappling with increasing medical problems that affect her health, behavior, and overall well-being. We held out hope that she would bounce back, but her ‘bad days’ now greatly outnumber her ‘good days.’”

Early last week, keepers noticed a change in the color of Little Mac's boli (dung). Tests suggest that there is bleeding in her intestines, which she is being treated for. Other zoo veterinarians experienced in geriatric elephant care and equine specialists have been consulted, but no diagnosis has been determined.

### Elephants at the Santa Barbara Zoo

Little Mac arrived at the Zoo in 1972 at the age of 1½ years with her companion Sujatha and the Zoo's elephant exhibit was especially designed for the two female elephants. It has been modified many times since 2004 to address the challenges of the elephants' advanced ages. The two lived together at the Zoo virtually their entire lives. Neither of the two ever bred or produced offspring.



In the nearly 50 years since Little Mac and Sujatha arrived at the Santa Barbara Zoo, standards for elephant management were developed and have been adapted by the AZA. The current needs of the AZA elephant program focus on having bigger herds with breeding bulls, and larger exhibits.

Since that new focus was adopted, the Zoo was “grandfathered in” by AZA for the two elephants and their exhibit. But the Zoo doesn't have space to expand the elephant exhibit to meet AZA's current requirements, or to hold a bull elephant.

“We are looking ahead at a time of change. Nothing has been decided, but new animals will be coming to the Zoo,” adds Block. “We will keep the public informed as this process takes shape.”

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*The **Santa Barbara Zoo** is located on 30 acres of botanic gardens and is home to nearly 500 individual animals in open, naturalistic habitats. It is accredited by the [Association of Zoos & Aquariums](#) (AZA), representing the highest level of animal care, and participates in AZA endangered species programs for California condor, Channel Island fox, and Western lowland gorilla, among others. A private 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation, the Santa Barbara Zoo depends on community support, not tax dollars, for operations and improvements. Visit [www.sbzoo.org](http://www.sbzoo.org).*