

The Daily News of Los Angeles

May 8, 2006 Monday  
VALLEY EDITION

SECTION: EDITORIAL; Pg. N13

### **HUMANE QUARTERS RIGHT FOR ELEPHANTS**

BY Lloyd Levine (Local View)

LIKE many Californians, I fondly recall childhood trips I took to the zoo and the circus, where I first encountered one of nature's most awesome creatures -- the elephant, the largest land mammal on earth.

Already 250 pounds and three feet tall at birth, elephants can grow to more than seven tons and 13 feet. Because of their size, elephants need the space to roam freely -- in the wild they often cover dozens of miles in a day.

However, in captivity, an elephant's life is contained in much tighter quarters and filled with much more hardship.

How is it that a 10,000-pound behemoth follows the lead of its 150-pound keeper? For many years, the only answer was to "break" the elephant by subjecting it to a variety of painful tactics. Still today there are trainers who continue to use chains to place elephants in painful stress positions, and bullhooks, which are wielded both as a spear and a baseball bat.

These methods are crude, cruel, antiquated and above all wrong.

Last year, the Detroit Zoo became the first in America to close an elephant exhibit solely for ethical reasons.

Detroit's two elephants -- Wanda and Winky -- shared about one acre of space at the zoo, enduring cold concrete floors and freezing winters. They now reside just outside San Andreas at the Performing Animal Welfare Society's 2,300-acre animal sanctuary. This past July, I had the privilege to visit the grounds with Pat Derby, a world-renowned expert in captive wildlife. She told me about the elephants under her care -- how difficult, and at times brutal, their lives at zoos and circuses had been.

After visiting the sanctuary, I wrote a letter to then-Mayor-elect Antonio Villaraigosa and members of the Los Angeles City Council expressing my concern over the welfare of the L.A. Zoo's elephants: Billy, Ruby and Gita. I suggested that instead of spending as much as \$50 million to remodel what will still be a very small space for these elephants, we should be working with a sanctuary to move them to a place where they can live out their final years in a more appropriate habitat.

Last December I met privately with L.A. Zoo Director John Lewis, who gave me a tour of the space where the zoo's elephants are housed and the site proposed for the expansion of its current exhibit. Lewis and his staff are working hard to provide the elephants with the best care possible. And yet, unintentional as it may be, it is clear that the elephants here and throughout the state are suffering.

This is why I have introduced AB 3027, legislation that requires zoos and circuses in California to change the way they care for, house and train elephants.

If this bill becomes law, by 2009 all zoos in California would be required to provide a minimum of five acres for up to three elephants, with another half acre for each additional elephant. By 2008, circuses would have to provide hundreds of square feet -- both indoors and out -- for their elephants. By 2008 the use of bullhooks and chains would be banned. These requirements are modeled after the exemplary elephant exhibit at the Oakland Zoo.

We can pursue the goals of this bill while being prudent with taxpayer money, but our actions should not solely be determined by dollar signs. We must find a way to give these elephants the level of care they deserve. If we truly value our humanity, it requires of us nothing less.

NOTES: Lloyd Levine, D-Van Nuys, represents the 40th District in the California Assembly.