

In the Mist of His Memory, INDOT Worker Recalls His Pet Gorilla

Whenever INDOT’s Adama Samba enjoys a banana, the years peel away. Suddenly, Samba is transported to his youth in Central Africa, where he had a pet gorilla named Mark.

“To this day, I think about Mark every time I eat a banana,” said Samba, a Fort Wayne District Construction Engineer. “One time while he was in his cage, I cut a banana and gave him a smaller portion. Being smart, Mark stared at me with his arms crossed, which made me feel sorry for him, so I attempted to trade my bigger portion for his smaller portion. He reached his arm through the cage and took my piece!”

Sept. 24 was World Gorilla Day, which prompted Samba to reflect on owning Mark as a pet while growing up in the country of Gabon. Samba was 2½ years old when his father impulsively purchased Mark from someone in a nearby village.

“Mark was a wild gorilla that was young and growing,” said Samba. “We treated him like a pet. He was kept in a 15-foot-long, 10-foot-wide, 4-foot-high cage much of the day to ensure that he wouldn’t destroy everything he touched. He was so smart. He knew his name; he would jump and make noises whenever I said it.”



Adama Samba’s pet gorilla was approximately this age and size during the one year the family kept it.

Samba grew up in an urban environment, but his parents’ house was situated on 3 acres of land. The spacious yard enabled the family to feel comfortable about letting Mark out of the cage to play. The family had found out the hard way that indoor “monkey business” was not wise.



Adama Samba

“When we let him out to play in the living room, he was so wild,” said Samba. “He couldn’t help himself from jumping everywhere and tearing things apart. He would grab the TV remote and just run away with it.”

Although Samba had siblings, he was the only family member who played with Mark in the yard — mostly “go-fetch and ‘fight’ games,” he said. Samba estimated that Mark was allowed to be out of the cage about two to four hours a day.

“Mark was so wild and free when out of the cage,” said Samba. “He knew when it was time to go back in the cage; every time I would start the process to corral him, he would try to run away.”

Samba’s friends had dogs, roosters, and ducks as pets. It is quite unusual to have a pet gorilla, according to Crawfordsville District Construction Project Manager Bernard Nartey, who grew up in the West African country of Ghana.

“It’s a very expensive and rigorous undertaking and may require a license,” said Nartey, noting that some adult gorillas consume 40 or more pounds of vegetation daily.

In 2001, less than a year after they purchased Mark, Samba's parents figured out that owning the gorilla was no longer sustainable.

"They realized that he was growing too fast and getting huge," said Samba. "We gave him away so that he could eventually be put back in the wild."

In 2014, Samba came to Fort Wayne to get a better education as well as more opportunities and experience in civil engineering. He secured a bachelor's degree in civil engineering from Purdue University Fort Wayne. After two years as a civil engineer for the city of Fort Wayne, he arrived at INDOT in May 2022.

"Looking back, I appreciate my dad for getting Mark, but I am glad that he was placed back in the wild," said Samba. "I also wish that I had photos of Mark. Back in 2000 and 2001, we didn't have a phone with cameras. All I have are my memories."

A full-grown gorilla eats approximately 40 pounds of vegetation a day, including plants and fruit.

