

How Animal Babies Can Save the World

By writing popular books about endangered species, a dad and his daughters help kids tackle some of life's toughest topics **By Judith Stone**

Owen was orphaned by the devastating tsunami of 2004. Swept out to sea off the coast of Kenya, stranded on a coral reef, and saved by villagers and visitors, the 600-pound, two-foot-high baby hippo, named after one of his rescuers, was taken to a nearby animal sanctuary.

The staff placed him in a large, leafy enclosure with a 130-year-old giant tortoise called Mzee—"wise old man" in Swahili—a grumpy loner just about the hippo's size. Perhaps because Mzee's domed shell reminded him of his lost mother's shape, Owen, about a year old, toddled behind the tortoise and tried to cuddle. Rebuffed with hisses, he persisted. Mzee's resistance eventually melted, and the next morning, the two were discovered snuggled side by side. Soon they were inseparable, wallowing, foraging, and napping together.

Not long after the animals surprised scientists by bonding—mammals and reptiles rarely become BFFs—Isabella Hatkoff, then a first grader, was reading the newspaper with her dad, New York City entrepreneur Craig Hatkoff, at the desk in his home office. She spotted a photo of Owen and Mzee (above) and was instantly smitten. "Daddy," the 6-year-old asked, "can this be our book?" It was Isabella's

turn to collaborate with her father; he and her older sister Juliana, 10 at the time, had already written two children's books together.

Hatkoff e-mailed Paula Kahumbu, Ph.D.—an ecologist who was then head of the Haller Park animal sanctuary, Owen's new home—and suggested they join forces; she agreed. And that's how the award-winning best seller *Owen and Mzee: The True Story of a Remarkable Friendship* came to be.

Since then, Hatkoff, 55, Isabella, now 10, and Juliana, 14, have teamed with experts to write four more nonfiction kids' picture books about endangered animal babies. Each is a ripping good adventure that also offers lessons in resilience and explains a threat to the environment in child-size bites. Besides two books about Owen and Mzee, there are *Knut: How One Little Polar Bear Captivated the World* and *Looking for Miza: The True Story of the Mountain Gorilla Family Who Rescued One of Their Own*. The trio's latest, out this month, is *Winter's Tail: How One Little Dolphin Learned to Swim Again*, about a baby dolphin who lost her tail when she got tangled in a crab trap off the Florida coast. Nursed back to health at the Clearwater Marine Aquarium, she's now the →

Photograph by Peter Greste

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mountain gorillas are left in the wild, experts say

owner of a prosthetic tail created by a designer of artificial limbs for veterans, athletes, and others.

Though the books, all published by Scholastic Press, are pitched to a primary school audience, they've been embraced by older kids and educators. At the Newport Mill Middle School in Kensington, MD, for example, lessons on dealing with loss are built around *Owen and Mzee*, named the best illustrated children's book of 2007 by the American Booksellers Association.

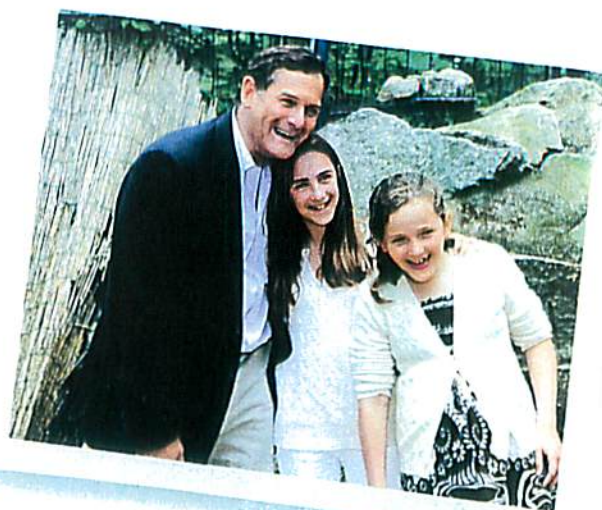
In 2008, Hatkoff created the Owen and Mzee Foundation to rally kids' support for conservation projects and host educational events like last year's Kids Gorilla Summit, cosponsored by the Clinton Global Initiative and Scholastic. Students from six New York City schools attended in person, joined by thousands more in classrooms around the world watching a Webcast. The foundation has donated money to pay the salaries of park rangers protecting the desperately imperiled mountain gorillas of Virunga National Park in Rwanda and the war-torn Democratic Republic of the Congo, and funded a biofuel project so refugees living in the Virunga Mountains won't have to cut down trees—gorillas' habitat and food source—for their cooking fires. It also supports the work of WildlifeDirect, a nonprofit dedicated to saving endangered animals that was founded by famed paleoanthropologist Richard Leakey. Thousands of children have signed a Kids Global Act Pact pledging to help protect gorillas; many of them have held fund-raisers. Starting this month, children's suggestions for keeping dolphins safe will be posted at winterstail.com. "It's a kids' philan-

thropic micro-movement," says Hatkoff with delight.

And it all began with inflamed tonsils. In 2000, when Juliana was nearly 5 and anxious about an upcoming tonsillectomy, Hatkoff recalls, he and his wife (film producer Jane Rosenthal) looked for a kids' book to calm their daughter. "We couldn't find what we needed," he says, "so we decided to keep a notebook, illustrated by Juliana, who's always loved to draw. I helped her write down what she was afraid of, and then we researched each step of the procedure." Recording the experience proved diverting and comforting. Hatkoff and Rosenthal showed Juliana's notebook to an editor who thought it would help other kids and transformed it into *Good-Bye Tonsils!*, with a foreword for parents by Harold S. Koplewicz, M.D., director of the New York University Child Study Center.

The second father-daughter collaboration emerged from the need to deal with a far more frightening event—the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in 2001. "Juliana wanted to do something to help," Hatkoff says, "so she brought her duck-shaped coin bank to a fire station nearby and made a donation." The family struck up a close friendship with one of the firefighters. When Dr. Koplewicz mentioned that he could use a book to help kids traumatized by 9/11, Hatkoff thought the tonsil formula might work again. He and Juliana wrote a candid, child's-eye account of that devastating day and its aftermath. It became the touching but unsentimental e-book *Ladder 35, Engine 40* (view it free

All in the family:
Craig Hatkoff
with daughters
(and fellow
authors) Juliana,
left, and Isabella



"It's easier to explain global warming to a kid using a book with cute baby animals"

online, or download and print it for \$2.30, at ebooks.ebookmall.com).

When Isabella spotted the newspaper photo of Owen and Mzee, Hatkoff saw another chance to help parents and kids tackle difficult real-life subjects in a compelling, commonsense, and compassionate way. Father and daughter began working long distance with Kahumbu, now head of WildlifeDirect. Isabella, an animal lover so dedicated that she spoon-fed a crippled pet lizard daily for two years, threw herself into learning about hippos and tortoises, with an assist from Juliana. Big sister rejoined the team for books about Knut, an abandoned polar bear cub who became the star of the Berlin Zoo; Miza, a lost, then found, gorilla that Kahumbu heard about from rangers at Virunga; and Winter the dolphin. Hatkoff does the writing; the girls help with research, discuss the direction of the story, and make written comments on the text. "We work together in my office, in short bursts," he says. "We all have other jobs!" Mom sometimes weighs in with opinions. "But my role is cheerleader," says Rosenthal. "I think it's great that the girls have this project with Craig. Through these →



Animal all-stars 1 Knut, the Berlin Zoo's celebrated polar bear cub; 2 Winter, the young dolphin with a prosthetic tail; 3 Miza, the rescued mountain gorilla whose story raised awareness of the dangers faced by her species

HOW KIDS CAN HELP

- On October 7 at 1 P.M. ET, meet Winter the dolphin on a live Webcast at scholastic.com/winterstail. Post suggestions about how to make crab traps dolphin-safe
- Sign the Kids Global Act Pact and learn what kids are doing to help gorillas at scholastic.com/miza
- Find something your child is passionate or puzzled about and start a notebook of drawings, research, and solutions. Kids under 13 can create and share a book online for free at tikatok.com; order a hardcover or paperback copy for about \$20

animal stories, they're learning about humankind—how they're part of the world at large, and how they can make a difference."

Isabella, who'd like to run an animal sanctuary when she grows up, has thought a lot about what she hopes kids will get out of the books she's helped create. "Owen and Miza and Knut and Winter are very cute animals," she says, "but the real message is that there is hope from something really sad—even if you do lose your mom, like Owen, or your mom and your tail, like Winter, or if your brother gets a fever and passes away, which happened to Knut." She's just watched a documentary about Winter made by the Clearwater Aquarium, shown as part of a family day at the Tribeca Film Festival, which her parents cofounded in 2002 to revitalize lower Manhattan after 9/11. "Kids can learn from *Winter's Tail* that if they have a handicap or a disability, that doesn't necessarily mean that they can't do something.

"I think the books are another way of connecting with children," she adds. "If you have a 3-year-old and you're trying to explain global warming in really long words, they're sitting there like, 'What?' But if you use a book that has cute baby animals in it, it's a little bit easier. You can say, 'This polar bear's home is melting, and polar bears might all die.'"

Last year, Hatkoff and Juliana, who's now a ninth grader, attended a gorilla-naming ceremony in Rwanda. What struck her, she says, was the realization that you can't help gorillas without helping people, because they compete for scarce resources. She and her dad accompanied medical workers from a rural clinic in

Rwanda on a home visit to a patient. "While we were waiting in the car," Hatkoff recalls, "Juliana gave one of our bottles of water to a child. Three or four more kids came running over, and she gave them bottles of water. All of a sudden, there were kids all around and we had no more water bottles. She turned to me and said, 'Daddy, what do we do?' It was an 'aha' moment: When you don't have enough resources, how do you make those difficult decisions? That's what it means to be a global citizen; that's what it means to be human.

"I told Juliana that she'd spend the rest of her life thinking about the answer to that question," Hatkoff says. "I don't have the answers, but I have tools. My grandfather was a mason and my father was a carpenter; he taught me how to hammer and lay bricks. We're giving our girls different tools for building their world. We want our books to be tools for engaging people in conversation."

From the first, Hatkoff and his daughters hoped to generate world-changing dialogue. But they never thought one of the most attention-getting conversations would be between a hippo and a tortoise. Within a year of forging their rare interspecies bond, Owen and Mzee startled scientists again by creating what seems to be a unique animal language—a soft, deep rumbling the pair use only with each other, sounds made by neither tortoises nor hippos in the wild. This unprecedented milestone in an unlikely friendship perfectly reflects, Hatkoff thinks, the themes that most move him and his two girls: how animals—humans included—cope with adversity, care for each other, and communicate against the odds. ■