

Sidedoor (S10E05) - Farewell Giant Pandas

Lizzie Peabody: Hey there, Sidedoor listeners: we have some big news at the National Zoo. As you may have heard, all three giant pandas are leaving for China in just a few weeks. So this episode, we're breaking our usual format to bring you into the Pandaverse for a very special farewell episode. Come on along.

Lizzie: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

[phone rings]

Stephen Powers: Hello, Stephen Powers.

Lizzie: Hi, Steven. It's Lizzie Peabody from Sidedoor. How are you?

Stephen Powers: I'm doing really well. Good to hear from you, Lizzie. How are you?

Lizzie: I'm great. I wanted to check back in with you because we put out an episode a while back called "[The Sex Lives of Giant Pandas](#)," which was in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the giant pandas coming to the National Zoo. And in that episode, you were our self-described lifelong panda fan, so I wanted to follow up to see how you're taking the news that all three giant pandas are heading to China in just a few weeks.

Stephen Powers: This is truly a sad time. I haven't been this disappointed with the pandas' situation since—since the late '90s when we lost the first two.

Lizzie: Have you been to see them since you heard that they were leaving?

Stephen Powers: Oh, yes. I took the whole family. We went down, and we actually had a great visit with them.

Lizzie: So I want to back up to the first time you saw the giant pandas at the National Zoo. Can you tell me about that encounter?

Stephen Powers: So the first time I saw the pandas, I was eight years old. We had been studying animals that were on the extinction list all year—the alligator and the bald eagle and the panda—and it culminated in the spring, going down to the zoo for a field trip to meet the new residents of Washington, DC. My mother was a chaperone on it, and I guess it had a big impact

on me. They were always special to me because of that.

Lizzie: *I don't think I really put together that it's not just that the pandas, whom you love, are leaving, it's sort of a point of connection for your family that's going away.*

Stephen Powers: *You know, it's one little bond, you know, between mother and son that we've always shared. It's that fabric of our lives, and doing it with my mother and then going with my kids, and actually their grandmother, it just brings that connection together. And the panda, you know, is like the frosting on the cake.*

Lizzie: *You know, something that strikes me about this is that I think in life, there are relatively few moments when you know something is like the last time you're gonna do something or the last time you're gonna see someone. I mean, most of the time, endings come unexpectedly and you sort of reckon with them afterward. What did it feel like to be there with your whole family, knowing that this was the last time you would be in the presence of these animals with your family?*

Stephen Powers: *It was sad, but it was also hopeful because when we saw them the final time, we were blessed. We got there middle of the day. All three were up. All three were animated. They were walking around. And while we were getting ready to leave, the one panda turned around and, as they will, took a big bamboo poop there for us.*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Stephen Powers: *It was funny because, you know, there are a lot of kids around and everybody groaned, and my wife and I, we kind of smiled. We were like, "Hey, this is the natural panda in its living state." And, you know, for us, it was a fitting end.*

Lizzie: This time on Sidedoor, an un-bear-able farewell as the Smithsonian's National Zoo prepares to send all three giant pandas to China before the end of the year. We'll speak with the director of the National Zoo about why the pandas are going back to China, hear a few personal memories from zoo visitors, and peek in on those bears ourselves one final time.

Lizzie: It's the end of a bear-a. I mean, an era. That's coming up after the break.

Angela Carpenter: *Hi, my name's Angela. I live in Washington, DC, just a couple miles from the National Zoo. In the early 2000s, my mother, Elaine Washburn, was an Asia Trail volunteer interpreter. When mom volunteered, she didn't actually want to be with the pandas. She asked to be trained in an area the zoo found it difficult to recruit volunteers for, but the recent arrival of Tian Tian and Mei Xian meant with the pandas was where she was most needed. Elaine became one of the pandas' biggest fans. In the summer of 2007, she decided she was going to make it a point to see all the pandas in the US. But even a three-city tour wasn't enough pandas for Elaine. Mom and her friend Angelo, who was a panda-cam operator, decided they would put*

together a budget trip to China to visit the China Conservation and Research Center for Giant Pandas in Sichuan.

Angela Carpenter: *But mom had a hernia that was the result of an ostomy, so in advance of the trip she decided she'd better have that repaired. Unfortunately, mom died of a postoperative infection on September 25, 2007. It's been 16 years since we lost Mom. Sometimes, when I need to feel close to her, I go to the zoo. When Tian and Mei go back to China, a bit of my mother's spirit and a piece of my heart will go with them.*

Lizzie: All right, here we are at the National Zoo, beautiful October afternoon. On our way to find the director of the National Zoo, Brandie Smith. But, first, we're gonna stop in and say hello to the giant pandas!

Lizzie: Here's Tian Tian. He's looking at us. Oh look, there's Mei Xian! Oh, oh! She's moving. Oh, she turned around. She's rolling onto her back. She's got a little hind leg sticking up in the air. Truly this is aspirational level relaxation for me. I don't think I've ever been as relaxed as this bear looks right now. Okay, this is Xiao Qi Ji, who is napping on a rock and kind of looks like he has just melted himself into the rock. All right, now that we've gotten our final look at these three pandas, we're gonna go talk with Brandie Smith, director of the National Zoo, and find out a little bit more about the journey they're about to take. Oh, Panda Market! Tiny, little stuffed pandas. We've got panda keychains, we've got panda sweatshirts. Bubble wand! You could have a panda bubble wand.

Lizzie: Hi!

Brandie Smith: I'm running from one thing to the next.

Lizzie: Oh, no. Thank you so much for meeting with us.

Brandie Smith: Hi, how are you doing? I'm Brandie.

Lizzie: I'm Lizzie. Good to meet you. Okay, there's a picture of a panda on your office wall. There's two, and they're doing the exact same thing. We just stopped by the panda enclosure, and they were doing the same thing of, like, lying sort of chin to the rock.

Brandie Smith: That's pretty much what a panda does. If it's not eating bamboo, it's usually sleeping.

Lizzie: Oh my gosh. It's inspirational, really.

Brandie Smith: I always feel like pandas are kind of zen. I think one of the reasons why people like to watch them is because it's a very soothing experience to see them, right? They're

definitely in the moment. They're like, "I'm breathing in, I'm breathing out, I'm a panda. All is good."

Lizzie: I love that. Brandie, just introduce yourself to our listeners. Tell us who you are and what you do.

Brandie Smith: My name is Brandie Smith, and I am the John and Adrian Morris Director of Smithsonian's National Zoo and Conservation Biology Institute.

Lizzie: So before this role, you were the curator of mammals at the National Zoo, and I understand you actually helped with the birth of some of the pandas at the zoo. What is it like to watch a panda being born?

Brandie Smith: You know, any time you work with pandas, there is zero margin for error because literally the entire world is watching everything that you do.

Lizzie: On camera.

Brandie Smith: Yes, on camera. [laughs] And they are all comment—they all have an opinion about it. So they are watching, and it's almost like you're surrounded by anxious parents around the world where they are also commenting and giving wonderful concerned feedbacks and suggestions.

Lizzie: This sounds like a nightmare delivery room experience.

Brandie Smith: It is. I don't want to use the word "terrifying," but I can't come up with a better word right now. But it's also thrilling to realize that I get to do a job that so many people care so deeply about.

Lizzie: Hmm.

Brandie Smith: So I always compare it—imagine if you had a child, and everybody wanted to hear about your child, right? Everywhere you went, people are like, "Tell me about your baby!" And so that's what it's like working with giant pandas. Everybody wants to hear about my baby.

Lizzie: And that's because panda babies are super rare because panda reproduction is such a challenge. We did actually a whole episode about it called "The Sex Lives of Giant Pandas," which all of our listeners should go and listen to. But anyway, Brandie, tell me who is at the National Zoo right now? Introduce us to this panda family.

Brandie Smith: So the two parents who have been with us are Mei Xian and—our female giant panda, and Tian Tian, our male. And they have given birth to four cubs over the years that

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they've been here. Tai Shan, who was the first male, and then there was a gap of several years before we then went on to have in quick succession: Bao Bao, Bei Bei and now Xiao Qi Ji. And Xiao Qi Ji we call our "miracle cub" because he was born at a time when her chance of giving birth was less than half a percent, just given her age.

Lizzie: Wow! So Mei Xian, Tian Tian and Xiao Qi Ji are all super popular, and not just with zoo visitors, but people all over the world. And I think the panda cam plays a big role in that. I think it's got millions of viewers. Can you help me understand why you think people are so enamored with these black and white bears that—no offense, don't really do very much?

Brandie Smith: Well, I think with pandas, they are—first of all, they're rare. You know, there are only about 1,800 pandas on the planet. And when people here visit, I say there are more black bears in the state of Virginia than there are pandas in the world.

Lizzie: Wow!

Brandie Smith: So, you know, 1,800 sounds like a lot until you put it into that kind of perspective.

Lizzie: Wow!

Brandie Smith: Also, you couldn't design a species that was more perfect for gearing toward our heartstrings. There are so many things about giant pandas that actually evoke the same emotion that infants do, that our children do, right? Their features, they're soft, they're round, even the decibel level of their cry, everything that they do, biochemical response to giant pandas is the same as you would have to seeing an infant or to an infant crying.

Lizzie: Wow. Yeah, I think I remember it being called something like cute schema. This idea of, like, the proportions of a face—big eyes wide apart, and that this is—or baby schema. Baby schema.

Brandie Smith: Well, and if you think about it, think about a lot of the filters that people put on their social media.

Lizzie: Oh my gosh, you're so right!

Brandie Smith: They're making themselves more panda like.

Lizzie: They're making themselves into little bears!

Brandie Smith: Yes, they're turning themselves into pandas with the big eyes and the round features and everything else. So there you go, everybody wants to be a panda.

Lizzie: I didn't until this moment, but now I do.

Brandie Smith: Mm-hmm.

Lizzie: So okay, I want to try to understand why the giant pandas are going back to China, but first, let's back up and just talk a little bit about how we got pandas in the first place.

[NEWS CLIP: A CBC color presentation. Good evening, I'm Ab Douglas. President Nixon's history-making tour of China goes into its fourth day today.]

Brandie Smith: In 1972, when President Nixon and his wife were visiting China, Pat Nixon saw—it was a cigarette holder, and it had pandas on them. And she commented on how much she liked them. And so that was essentially as a gift to the First Lady because of her interest in giant pandas, our country was sent a pair of giant pandas which we kept at the National Zoo.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Pat Nixon: On behalf of the people of the United States, I am pleased to be here and accept the precious gift of the pandas and also these other mementos from the government of the People's Republic of China. And I think pandamonium is going to break out right here at the zoo. Thank you very much.]

Brandie Smith: Pandas at that point were an act of diplomacy, and with Mei Xian and Tian Tian, there's a new model that China is using for their panda diplomacy. And it's not just simply a state gift, but there are agreements with the countries that ensure that pandas—there are a lot of things about how the pandas should be cared for, and the goals that we have in terms of care and conservation. But there is also as part of the agreement, money that is guaranteed to be spent on giant panda conservation and research.

Lizzie: Hmm. So instead of a straight gift, "Here's a spare, do with it what you will. See you later," there is an understanding, "We are giving you this animal on loan, with the understanding that you will be contributing to conservation and research."

Brandie Smith: Yes. It's an investment to ensure that we show that there is a conservation benefit to having giant pandas come to the United States.

Lizzie: Okay, so China extended the loan a few times, and that sort of brings us to the situation we're in today. China decided not to extend the loan on the three pandas that we have right now. Why didn't the loan get extended this time?

Brandie Smith: Our goal again is to save a species, and one of our areas of expertise and focuses is on giant panda reproduction. And Mei Xian and Tian Tian are essentially post reproductive. So through our partnership and our conversations, we wanted to return Mei Xian and Tian Tian to China. Xiao Qi Ji, the cub, was always destined to go to China because he needs to be part of the breeding program there.

Brandie Smith: And then our goal will be to bring in a new pair of pandas so we can continue our work on research, neonatal development, parental investment, different things like that.

Lizzie: Okay, that makes total sense. Let me just play the devil's advocate, though, here and say, like, why wouldn't China just let us keep our old pandas to live out their golden years in these beautiful enclosures we have here so that people can see them and admire them? I mean, why take them back?

Brandie Smith: So our goal is to save a species, so we are working with our colleagues in China to manage the entire population in a way that most benefits the species as a whole. And the biggest benefit that we can have on this population is to allow Mei Xian and Tian Tian to return to China, and for us to acquire a new pair of giant pandas so we can continue the very important research that we have on these animals.

Lizzie: And there have been clear benefits to the Smithsonian's panda partnership with China, so does this make you hopeful that China will give us more bears and continue the partnership moving forward?

Brandie Smith: I am very hopeful that we will be able to continue it. And so what I can promise you is a few days after these giant pandas move to China, is that we are going to start working on their habitat, putting in new climbing structures, different pools, different fun things. Our conservation work is gonna continue, and I am very hopeful that after a brief lull, we'll roll into the next 50 years of a successful program.

Kathleen Hamilton: *My name is Kathleen Hamilton, and I remember distinctly as a seven-, eight-year-old little girl in 1972 watching on the news the arrival of Ling-Ling and Hsing-Hsing. I literally begged my parents day after day to, "Please, I want to go to the zoo. I want to see the pandas!" And finally, my grandfather sprung me out of elementary school and secretly took me on a day trip to the National Zoo.*

Kathleen Hamilton: *Literally, I was in awe of seeing them in real life. And as I was standing there just gawking, my grandfather was having a conversation behind me. And it turned out there was a girl from China who was my age, she was eight years old, and her grandfather were taking—doing the very same outing. He told us with tears in his eyes what Ling-Ling's name meant, "Darling Girl," and Hsing-Hsing, "Shining Star."*

Kathleen Hamilton: *As soon as I had kids, we came from North Carolina, and I made sure my*

kids got to see the pandas. And Ling-Ling and Hsing-Hsing will forever be a treasured memory of mine.

Lizzie: All right, I'm talking with Brandie Smith, the director of the Smithsonian's National Zoo, and we are talking about the zoo's giant pandas leaving for China sometime before the end of the year. Okay Brandie, anyone who has ever flown with a cat or dog knows that it is a challenge for both the animal and the humans around the animal. I cannot imagine that it's easy to transport a panda over 7,000 miles. So how are these pandas getting to China?

Brandie Smith: [laughs] So actually, it's an incredible process. We start months in advance, because the pandas are going to be transported in their own individual crates. And we want those crates to be happy places.

Brandie Smith: You know, you talked about a cat or a dog. A lot of people have their dogs crated during the day or at night, and people know they open up the crate, the dog goes in, happy to go. So we want the same thing for these giant pandas. So we make them happy places. We give them treats in there, and so we open up the door, they go in and they're happy to spend time in there.

Lizzie: Hmm.

Brandie Smith: So first of all, they're being transported in a way that they'll be comfortable and relaxed. And then when we send them, FedEx is donating an exclusive flight just for our giant pandas.

Lizzie: Wow!

Brandie Smith: So they're gonna have their own jet upon which they are gonna be transported. They are—the pandas are essentially the only kind of passengers. And they will be traveling with a veterinarian and two of their favorite keepers. So it's not—right? So imagine you're, like, the team of panda keepers and we're like, "Okay, you guys are their favorites, so you get to go with them." Hard selection, right?

Lizzie: Yeah. Yeah.

Brandie Smith: It's a total judgment.

Lizzie: Oh, wow! Okay, this is sort of a silly question, but I'm actually curious: will the pandas have culture shock? Do they speak Mandarin?

Brandie Smith: If you ever watch our keepers communicate with the giant pandas, there are words that they're saying, but also there are gestures that they are doing. And so if a panda is

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sitting on the ground, and I want Tian Tian to stand up before I'm gonna give him a reward, I literally just take my hand and then raise it up in the air. And that's something like, you know, "Up," you use the voice and you say "Up," or you say, you know, "Lie down," or you say "Open," but they're all accompanied by gestures, which anyone watching would easily be able to interpret.

Lizzie: Hmm.

Brandie Smith: Pandas are pretty smart, so we don't give them enough credit. They pick up on things pretty quickly.

Lizzie: Yeah, it's like being a foreign exchange student, though, as an adult, I imagine.

Brandie Smith: It is, but they're not gonna be able to engage in social media and ignore the new culture around them, so they're gonna have to find their way through. It's like being an exchange student back in the day, not like it is right now.

Lizzie: Fair point. Good. Okay, they're set up for success. So some people think that the pandas are going to China to be released into the wild, and I know that that's definitely not the case, but the pandas will contribute to the wild population. So how does that work?

Brandie Smith: Ultimately, pandas in zoos serve two purposes. One is obviously you can't save an endangered species if people don't care about it. So number one, one of the reasons why we're moving the needle on pandas, why we're actually succeeding for this species is because so many people care and they care so deeply. So that's number one.

Brandie Smith: But the other reason is to provide kind of an assurance population, right? A stable, genetically-diverse group of animals from which we could repopulate the wild. We can either supplement the existing population or, you know, if something went horribly wrong, we could essentially have animals to repopulate the wild if the need happened. And so our animals returning to China means their genes are in that population, so it's a more stable population. And the goal would be eventually their offspring, right, as we save more habitat, right, as we increase the opportunities for giant pandas in the wild, their offspring will be the animals that are going back into the wild.

Lizzie: Hmm. So Xiao Qi Ji's panda cubs will be going back into the wild?

Brandie Smith: They could be.

Lizzie: Could be.

Brandie Smith: So there's a potential.

Lizzie: We know what's next for the pandas. What is next for the zoo? I know you don't know for sure. I mean, it sounds like we're pretty confident that we can expect some more pandas to come our way, we hope. Maybe? Hopefully?

Brandie Smith: Well I mean, so first of all, we are committed to giant panda conservation. So that's gonna happen. Even when the pandas leave here, we will continue with our efforts to understand and conserve giant pandas in the wild. And yes, we are absolutely hopeful that a new pair of pandas will be here sometime soon in the future.

Lizzie: Do you have even a sense of—I mean, could it be as early as a few months, or are we thinking years, or I mean, does ...

Brandie Smith: People assume that if China says, "You can have pandas," we would say, "Okay," and we could get pandas the next day. But something that people don't think about when we talk about sending the animals, you don't—there are certain times of year when you don't want to send the animals. I've never ever shipped pandas in the summer.

Lizzie: Oh!

Brandie Smith: Right?

Lizzie: Right.

Brandie Smith: So the weather's too hot. It's not just on the airplane, but there's, you know, driving to the airport, there's time on the tarmac before you're loaded onto the airplane and all of the effort here. So, you know, when you're moving pandas, you want to do it in the shoulder season simply because those are the best times to do it for those animals.

Lizzie: I would never have thought of that, but yeah, so I guess next spring is the earliest we can hope for, but we don't know. So like we talked about, the zoo's identity is so intertwined with the giant panda. Are we gonna take them off of our maps and the signs, and—I mean, they're everywhere around here.

Brandie Smith: We do not want people to come here, and—and we want to make sure there's not a map telling them how to get to giant pandas, because then they would be disappointed. But you know what's funny? We didn't set out to make giant pandas our iconic species.

Lizzie: This wasn't like a branding decision in some, like, marketing meeting?

Brandie Smith: No, it wasn't a plan, it was simply because that was the interest and that was the demand. We have people who come to see pandas almost every day.

Lizzie: The same people who come almost every day?

Brandie Smith: Yes.

Lizzie: Wow! So on a personal level, does it make you sad to say goodbye? Or do you feel like you have a better—that your sense of the meaning of this transition overrides any kind of personal sadness?

Brandie Smith: So right now I am so focused on making sure that this transport goes off safely, right, for the animals and for the people involved. So right now it's all about the business of what we're engaged in. Also in this profession, this is what we do. This is not about individual animals and how much we love them, it's about survival of species.

Brandie Smith: I can say all that now, but I'm gonna be a hot mess on the day that these pandas are leaving.

Lizzie: Aww!

Brandie Smith: So my goal will be not to cry on camera, and to take moments on the side. And it's definitely gonna be sad when they leave.

Lizzie: Brandie, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us. This has been really a pleasure and an honor.

Brandie Smith: I love talking about my pandas, and I love the fact that everybody wants to hear about them, so I've enjoyed this time. Thank you.

Lizzie: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. To learn more about what's going on with the giant pandas at the Smithsonian's National Zoo, check out our newsletter. You can subscribe at [SI.EDU/Sidedoor](https://si.edu/Sidedoor). And don't forget to check out our previous episode about Giant Pandas. It's called "[The Sex Lives of Giant Pandas](#)." You can find that in our podcast feed.

Lizzie: The pandas are scheduled to leave for China by mid-November, so you can still catch them at the zoo or live on the zoo's panda cam! But hurry up, because the cam will be turned off before the pandas get into their travel crates. Although you can always check out one of the zoo's many other live animal cams.

Brandie Smith: *There are bets on which camera is gonna become more popular. I will say our small mammal house team truly believes that our naked mole rat cam will step in to fill the panda cam void.*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Lizzie: We'll share links to those feeds on our Instagram account: [@SidedoorPod](#).

Lizzie: For help with this episode, we want to thank Brandie Smith, Stephen Powers and Annalisa Meyer. Special thanks to Angela Carpenter and Kathleen Hamilton for sending their memories of the pandas. If you want to wish the pandas farewell or share a memory, you can do that right in the Spotify app.

Lizzie: Our podcast is produced by James Morrison and me, Lizzie Peabody. Our associate producer is Nathalie Boyd. We had special help this episode from Amy Drozdowska.

Lizzie: Executive producer is Ann Conanan. Our editorial team is Jess Sadeq and Sharon Bryant. Tami O'Neill writes our newsletter. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Extra support comes from PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

Lizzie: If you have a pitch for us, send us an email at [Sidedoor\(@\)si.edu](mailto:Sidedoor(@)si.edu)! And if you want to sponsor our show, please email [sponsorship\(@\)PRX.org](mailto:sponsorship(@)PRX.org).

Lizzie: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

Lizzie: *I'll never forget when we did our episode about elephants, just being eye to eye with— with a creature that big and having it breathe on your face, there's something important that happens when you're able to get that close to an animal.*

Brandie Smith: *Have you ever seen an elephant pee? Right? It's epic!*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Brandie Smith: *So I've never—there's like a hushed, "Oh my gosh!" when something like that happens, across every age, every person. So just the capability, like the physiological capability of these animals is just incredible, things that people don't appreciate.*

Lizzie: *It's awe inspiring.*

Brandie Smith: *Right?*