

To the members of the North Carolina House Judiciary Committee:

My name is Virginia Black. My 22-year-old niece, Alex Black, was killed by a lion Dec. 30, on the 10th day of her unpaid internship with the Conservators Center near Burlington. I am writing to urge you to pass H577, but to strengthen it with more accountability for zoos and sanctuaries.

The Conservators Center has shared some information with my family, without making it public. We still hope to learn more from a report the center commissioned after the attack and from OSHA.

But we now know that Alex was working with another intern and a staff “keeper,” whose job it was to ensure the lion moved safely from one enclosure to the next and was secured. This clearly did not happen. The center said the keeper, who no longer works there, never provided a satisfactory answer for her lapse. Although fluids were collected from Alex’s body to test for drugs and alcohol, which is standard in a workplace accidental death, we have no information about whether that process applied to anyone on the staff. We might never know why the lion was able to walk out of his enclosure. Clearly, it was human error.

The Conservators Center told us Alex was outside both enclosures - technically in the park, which was open to visitors who were in other areas that day - preparing deer meat for the lions. When he escaped and faced Alex, rather than panic and run away, she tried to keep him calm, keeping his focus on her and trying to distract him with the deer. Clearly, this did not work. We believe that by her calm actions, it is possible she saved other lives that day.

Instead, he attacked and dragged her back into one of the enclosures.

I will not outline the steps the center took to save the lion while my niece lay bleeding out. It is possible that she died too quickly to be helped, even if medical personnel were able to reach her in a more timely manner. In a way, we hope that she did. But the center apparently made an early decision that she had died, and the priority became saving the lion.

My niece remained on the ground in the lion’s enclosure for more than two hours while the staff tried to tranquilize the lion, who was protective of my niece, before the sheriff’s department finally shot the animal eight times to kill him. A witness to the scene, who does not want to be identified because of possible repercussions, told me that no weapons were stored anywhere near the enclosure. The center did not retrieve a firearm at any time. When the gentleman tried to assemble the tranquilizer gun, *he was reading the instructions*. Apparently, the center owned only one tranquilizer gun, because when it broke, they turned to darts, which proved to be remarkably ineffective.

It seems clear that if the center had a real plan for how it would react in such a situation, it had rarely or never been practiced. Why the lion was not quickly shot when it became clear he would not leave the body, we do not know. What was their protocol? Is it the same now?

Just within the last week, two incidents of tigers attacking zoo and sanctuary keepers made national news. In both instances, in St. Louis and Arizona, the keepers entered enclosures against protocol. But also, both lived – and they received medical help within minutes.

We know nobody woke up that Sunday morning intending to allow a lion to kill our Alex. We know the incident was also difficult for staff, and certainly for first responders, as well. The center has told us that at least one of its protocols has changed: Two keepers are now in charge of ensuring the safety of the enclosures instead of just one.

But without requiring accreditation, who will hold such well-meaning organizations accountable? Who will ensure not only that they have detailed plans and protocols to ensure safety and allow for retrieval of an escaped animal, but that they are adequate and reasonable and that they are practiced? Shouldn't employees and the public admiring these animals have the peace of mind of knowing what to expect if the unthinkable happens again?

I encourage the passing of this bill, but I urge that you strengthen it with greater measures of accountability:

- Safety plans should be reported to and approved by a law enforcement agency, and safety drills should be routine for zoos and sanctuaries.
- Sanctuaries and zoos where a person has been killed or injured where investigation has revealed a lack of proper safety drills, equipment and protocols should no longer be able to keep dangerous wild animals.
- Such centers should be required to maintain liability insurance in an amount not less than \$250,000 for each occurrence of property damage, bodily injury or death by a wild animal in its possession.

My family does not live in North Carolina. We know that any actions you take will not bring back my niece. But we want to believe that you can learn from our unrelenting grief, and that her death might have meaning in spurring changes meant to prevent the same pain for any other families.

Thank you for your time and consideration.
