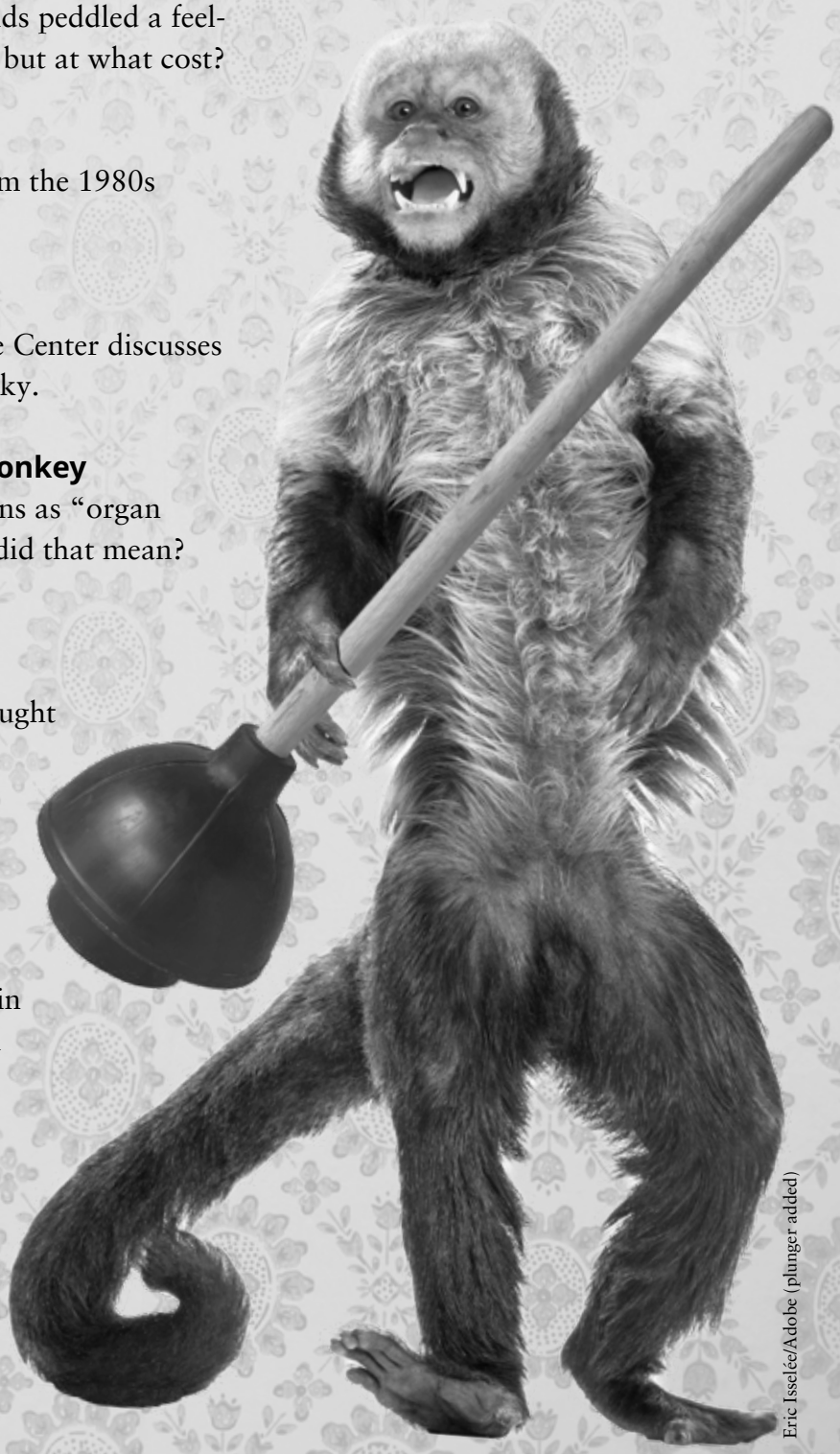
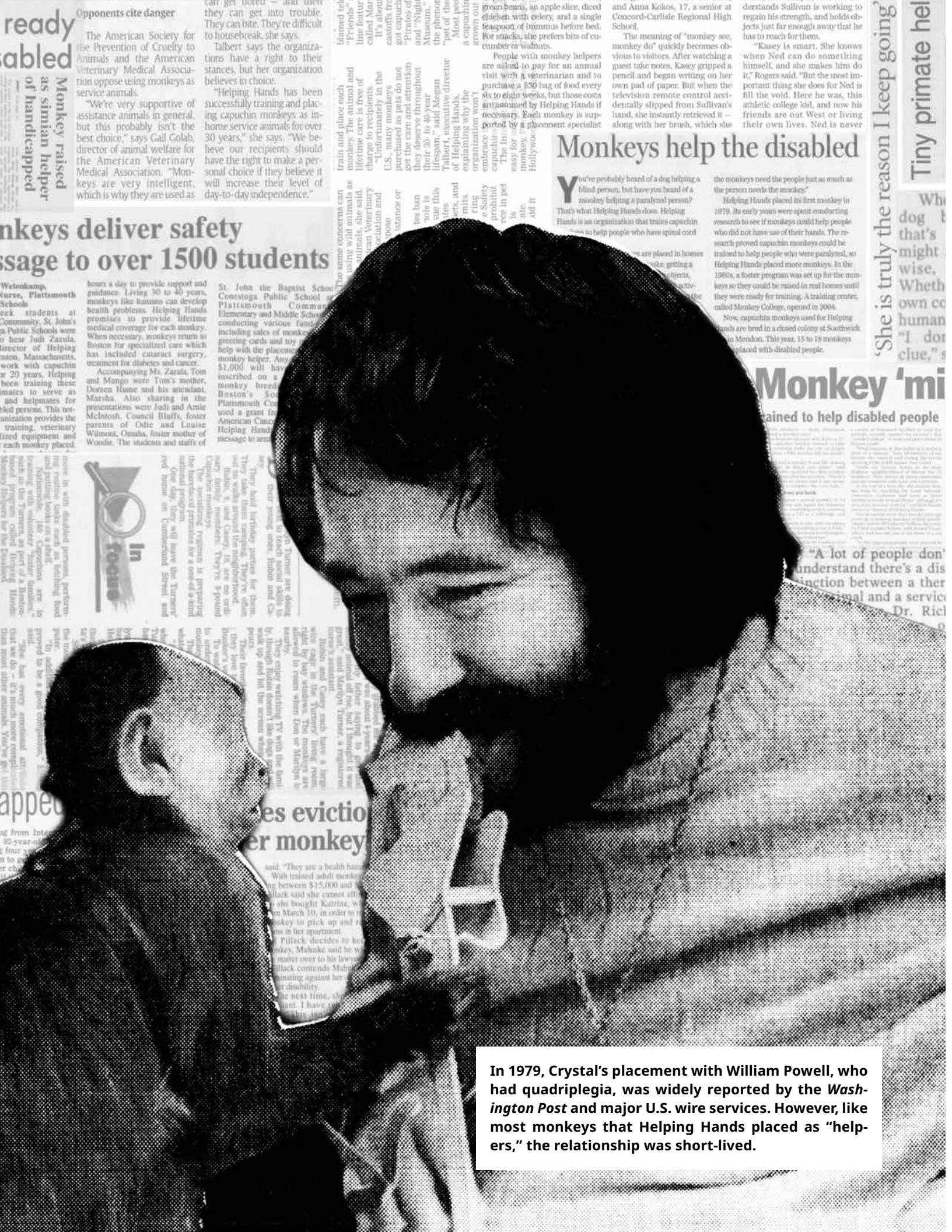
APE SH*T | Issue #1 | 2026



Eric Isselée/Adobe (plunger added)



In 1979, Crystal's placement with William Powell, who had quadriplegia, was widely reported by the *Washington Post* and major U.S. wire services. However, like most monkeys that Helping Hands placed as "helpers," the relationship was short-lived.

THE BIZARRE HISTORY OF THE SERVICE MONKEY

ONLY IN AMERICA

In the 1970s, advances in medical care had led to extraordinary gains for victims of spinal-cord injuries. Veterans and crash victims who should not have survived their catastrophes were hospitalized and treated, yet many were left with bodies that seemed frozen in place. "*Quadriplegics*," they were called. Paralyzed, they were stuck in wheelchairs, dependent on others to feed them, bathe them, and manage their every need. It was, by many accounts, a wrenching, hellish existence.

In the late 1970s, when word got out that a Tufts psychologist was training tiny capuchin monkeys to serve as help-mates for quadriplegic people, the media was all over the story. Mary Jean Willard launched Helping Hands: Simian Aides for the Disabled (later: Helping Hands: Monkey Helpers) in 1979 and set her sights on making monkeys the equivalents of guide dogs for the blind. The idea seemed bizarre, even at the time. But a public trained on chimp movies like *The Barefoot Executive* was eager to see it in action. As soon as Willard announced her experiment, the news media pounced, capturing images of capuchins in partnership with the paralyzed. Mainstream outlets such as *Ladies Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *60 Minutes* popularized the story; even Disney World got involved. Global media pounced as well. But when researchers in Canada, Israel, Japan, Argentina, and Europe launched experiments to test where helper monkeys were viable, they all came to the same conclusion: Helper monkeys were not actually helpful. Monkeys are wild animals, so their behavior around humans is unpredictable. Capuchins evolved to explore jungles and leap through trees — not sit in cages, isolated from peers, and be shuttled back and forth in human households.

A reasonable person may have expected the story to end shortly after it began. Once the world realized that this effort was a scientific, logistical, and moral failure, you'd expect it to fade into history along with biorhythms and water beds. And, of course, in the other countries, it did.

But, in the U.S., the story didn't end here. Helping Hands continued operations for ***a full 42 years***, rebranding only when the COVID-19 pandemic hit — long after the departure of its founder, long after the idea of monkey "helpers" proved to be nonsense, after an explosion in assistive technologies, and amid a growing public consciousness that monkeys are not, in fact, widgets, and do not make suitable pets.

So how did Helping Hands do it? In researching this history, I've interviewed people with firsthand experiences and pored over written accounts, including two memoirs; the organization's annual and financial reports, archived web pages (thanks, archive.org!), and social media; and over 100 newspaper, magazine, and TV stories. I also looked at the scant science behind the project and reached out to Envisioning Access (the rebranded Helping Hands) and to former staff, but received no response (not that I blame them for ignoring someone from *Ape Sh*t*.)

The story here has never been told. It is messy, complicated, and filled with unanswered questions.

— *Carrie McLaren*

Alison Pascoe

EX-HELPING HANDS MONKEY TRAINER

Alison Pascoe worked as head trainer for Helping Hands from 1980 to 1986, while the organization operated out of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. As part of that work, Pascoe housed one of the more fragile monkeys, Amelia, in her New York City apartment. It was not uncommon for Helping Hands staff to bring monkeys home: doing so saved space at the facility and helped keep the animals engaged with humans. What was uncommon is that when Pascoe left Helping Hands, she kept Amelia with her, moved upstate, and began openly criticizing the organization.

Helping Hands' MJ Willard denounced Pascoe's criticisms as those of a disgruntled former employee. Certainly, there are aspects of Pascoe's record — for example, her decision to keep Amelia as a pet — that raise eyebrows. But we leave it to readers to judge her perspective on the merits.

When did you first get involved with Helping Hands?

I worked there for six years, starting about a year after the founding. I didn't know anything about monkeys, but I had zoology training. I was shocked that the monkeys had total tooth extractions, but I figured these monkeys didn't have any better options. They were all adults who had been surrendered as pets for attacking their owners. Monkeys will attack you and be your best friend five minutes later. A lot of people take out their canines, which doesn't do anything to protect you.

Removing canines doesn't help?

No, because if they still have their molars and front teeth, they are going to bite *hard*.

Later on, Helping Hands said that they only extracted the front teeth and left the molars. Do you know if that's true?

I don't, but I find it impossible that they could place any monkey with any teeth anywhere. The monkeys would clamp down on you like a pit bull. I can't imagine placing a monkey with any teeth safely. Even with no teeth, a monkey bite hurts! They know where to get you — they target the space between your thumb and forefinger, or hit your Achilles heel. I never met a monkey that didn't bite. And it wasn't predictable. If you take something away, they'd attack you.

I was the only trainer at Helping Hands when I was there, so they got used to me. If one of MJ [Willard]'s Fordham students went in, they would attack.

At one point, Helping Hands said they only used females. What happened to the males?

Well, the males would masturbate and ejaculate at you. And they have a really long penis that looks like a plunger. They are also more aggressive and pee everywhere.

Were they castrated?

Not while I was there. We only used one male while I was there. The problem with females is that they would go into heat every 30 days, so they had to have hysterectomies. We put a cast around their stomach so they wouldn't rip out their stitches. Amelia, the monkey who stayed with me, would hand me scissors to try to get me to cut off the cast. When she went into heat, she'd run over to my

husband and start rubbing herself against him and attach herself to his leg, to a point where he couldn't pull her off. Unfortunately, my husband was allergic to her. People allergic to cats are often allergic to monkeys.

I read that one Helping Hands monkey would grab someone's ears and hump their face when she was in heat. Did Amelia do anything like that?

She would grab someone's face if she didn't want them near my husband… well, unless it was somebody else she wanted, in which case she'd look him straight in the eye, grab both of his cheeks, and start drooling.

If Amelia was in her cage when my husband came home, she would literally jump her cage across the room to get to him! The Helping Hands cage was so small that she could jump hard enough to move it. [A male voice in the background says, "Yeah, that was a little unnerving."] If another female came into the house, she'd attack to keep them away from him. So she got a hysterectomy — all of the monkeys had to get spayed.

Hellion was the first monkey successfully placed. No one ever spayed her, so when her breast milk came in, she would squirt it at the guy [her recipient].

REVENGE OF THE CAPUCHINS

In a video from a now-classic experiment with capuchins, a lab researcher gives one monkey a slice of cucumber in exchange for a pebble, then hands another capuchin a much better snack — a grape — for the same "payment." The first capuchin, upon seeing her neighbor get a better deal, rebels: she hurls the cucumber back at the researcher and angrily shakes the cage bars.*

This experiment has been repeated many times, with a clear takeaway: capuchins have an instinct for fairness. When a situation isn't going their way or when they sense something isn't right, they lash out, escape, thwart their attackers, and destroy things. If they can't take their anger out on their attacker, they'll do it to someone or something else.

Moreover, according to expert Susan Perry, when capuchins have lost a fight, they don't quit: "They just back away, and they're like, 'I'm getting revenge later.' "**

Here, *Ape Sh*t* presents a few excerpts from nonfiction accounts of capuchins pushing back against their captors.

A female capuchin monkey named Gloria occupied a large, roomy cage in my study. When I went out, she became exceedingly bored and exerted all her talents to escape as quickly as possible. One evening, when I returned home after a longer absence and turned the knob of the light switch, all remained dark as before. But Gloria's giggle, issuing not from the cage but from the curtain rod, left no doubt as to the cause and origin of the light defect.

When I returned with a lighted candle, I encountered the following scene: Gloria had removed the heavy bronze bedside lamp from its stand, dragged it straight across the room (without pulling the plug out of the wall), heaved it up on to the highest of my aquaria, and, as with a battering ram, bashed in the glass lid so that the lamp sank in the water. Hence the short circuit!

Gloria had unlocked my bookcase—an amazing achievement considering the minute size of the key—removed volumes 2 and 4 of Strumpel's textbook of medicine and carried them to the aquarium stand, where she tore them to shreds and stuffed them into the tank. On the floor lay the empty book covers, but not one piece of paper. In the tank sat sad sea-anemones, their tentacles full of paper." —Konrad Lorenz in *King Solomon's Ring: New Light on Animal Ways* (1952)

* TED video at youtube.com/watch?v=meiU6TxysCg

** knowablemagazine.org/content/article/living-world/2025/meet-the-capuchin-monkey

Susan Perry

Oyvind Martinsen/Alamy

This capuchin [left] stole an egg from a curassow, a bird four times his size. While the mother tried to guard her nest, the monkey dismantled it from below, "grabbing fistfuls of nest material and feathers" before snagging an egg.

Capuchins' number-one predator is other capuchins. Much like chimps, they share our capacity for "intraspecific killing," which is definitely not the same as murder, because animals who murder are uniquely intelligent and complex.

MikeLane45/iStock

Along with chimps, capuchins are among the few nonhuman primates that hunt vertebrate prey, including birds (and their eggs), lizards, frogs, rodents, and coati pups. The fierce little bruisers can kill prey up to a third of their body weight.