June Slater Park Zoo—a five-acre menagerie in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, originally opened in 1937—permanently closed. The Pawtucket City Council had voted to close the zoo largely to save the city $330,000 a year, but the pressure that led this decision had come primarily from those concerned about the quality of housing and care provided to the zoo's animals.

In 1990 local residents, animal-rights/protection groups, and environmental groups began complaining to the Pawtucket City Council of the zoo's conditions—worse than most visitors would ever imagine. In April 1991 Save the Park, a local environmental group, contacted The HSUS for assistance. This request coincided with complaints to us from HSUS members and visitors to the zoo. In response, we wrote to the city council requesting that they investigate the situation and begin discussions with critics of the zoo to determine how their concerns could best be addressed.

Over the next few weeks, HSUS New England Regional Director Arnold Baer, HSUS New England Regional Investigator Frank Ribaudo, and I visited the zoo several times. Although Slater Park Zoo had recently passed inspection by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), our visits confirmed the reports we had received from local residents. The exhibit areas were antiquated and in need of repair; most of the animals were not even identified; and the animals were not even identified by species. Clearly the zoo had no established plan for education or conservation.

In most zoo areas, visitors had easy access to the animals, who were getting frequent handouts of junk food. Whereas free-living Himalayan bears normally weigh 100–250 pounds, these bears were grossly overweight. Later each was found to weigh nearly 500 pounds. Also, the bears were kept in one barren cage on a cement slab; their small enclosure and isolation. For its Animals

While at Slater Park Zoo, Fanny received frequent handouts of junk food from visitors. Now, in her comfortable home at Black Beauty Ranch, she can relish meals of fresh, abundant vegetables.

For Its Animals

The condition of three Himalayan bears, one male and two females, attested to their being fed a steady stream of junk food by visitors, in addition to their zoo diet of dog food. Whereas free-living Himalayan bears normally weigh 100–250 pounds, these bears were grossly overweight. Later each was found to weigh nearly 500 pounds. Also, the bears were kept in one barren cage on a cement slab; their small enclosure and freedom of their spacious enclosure. Fanny and Conga socialize daily.
In June 1992 John W. Grandy, Ph.D., HSUS vice president, Wildlife and Habitat Protection, wrote to the city council. He repeated HSUS objections to conditions at Slater Park Zoo and conveyed our offer to pay for Fanny's relocation to a suitable sanctuary. In July Mr. Ribaudo restated the offer to Pawtucket mayor Robert Metivier and expressed our willingness to assist in finding suitable new homes for the other animals as well.

In January 1993 we mailed our Rhode Island members an Action Alert calling for the zoo’s closing. Soon after, the Pawtucket City Council unanimously voted to close the zoo. In February the mayor formally accepted the council's decision and appointed a relocation committee, which included Mr. Ribaudo, to research options for relocating the zoo's animals.

In May the committee chose Black Beauty Ranch in Murchison, Texas—a 620-acre animal sanctuary run by the Fund for Animals—as the most suitable new home for Fanny. Black Beauty Ranch had a new elephant barn, and “Conga,” a twenty-one-year-old female African elephant, was one of the ranch’s residents. Animal-sanity personified familiar with elephant behavior believed Conga and Fanny would be compatible.

On June 5 Slater Park celebrated “Fanny Fest” with a parade and tributes to Fanny. The next day the zoo permanently closed. Late that night Fanny was loaded onto a forty-five-foot truck by Ed Novack, an animal-transport expert with a history of many flawless elephant transfers. Fanny began her thirty-nine-hour journey to 620-acre animal sanctuary run by the Fund for Animals—known as Black Beauty Ranch. Upon arrival in her one-acre enclosure, Fanny walked to a pond, drew water into her trunk, and sprayed herself. Later, in her corral in the elephant barn, she met Conga. As related by Christopher Byrne, manager of Black Beauty Ranch, within minutes Fanny and Conga began sharing hay and intertwining their trunks.

Three weeks later Slater Park’s Himalayan bears were removed for transport to Wildlife Images Rehabilitation and Education Center. Located in Grants Pass, Oregon, this animal sanctuary is noted for its expertise in caring for bears. With the assistance of two veterinarians, the bears were placed in separate ventilated cages for the cross-country journey. Tragically, just five hours' distance from Wildlife Images, the male bear was found dead in his cage. The apparent cause of death, as later determined by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Forensic Laboratory in Ashland, Oregon, was acute failure of the pancreas induced by poor diet, obesity, and the stress of transport. The two female bears reached Wildlife Images safely.

Mr. Ribaudo and Gulf States Regional Director James Noe visited Fanny in July and found her doing well. On a healthier diet, she now enjoys eating fresh apples spread before one of the bears. Although the bears can now enjoy a healthy diet, it could be years before they are no longer overweight.

The process of closing Slater Park Zoo and relocating its animals has been arduous. “I have never before been involved with an issue so time-consuming, so intense, so draining, and so rewarding,” Mr. Ribaudo commented.

Ultimate, public zoos are the responsibility of their respective communities, which determine whether or not a zoo will close and where any displaced animals will go. Even so, the Slater Park Zoo experience shows that, working together, animal advocates can convince communities to change, even halt, “business as usual” at facilities that exhibit animals. Most of the zoo's animals have now been moved to facilities better equipped to meet their physical and psychological needs. Fanny and all the other animals relocated from Slater Park have the chance for a better life. We hope that other municipal zoos will step to reassess how they care for animals.

Randall Lockwood, Ph.D., HSUS vice president, Educational Initiatives, formerly oversaw the activities of all regional offices.