



## Boy saves gorillas, one egg at a time

12-year-old's project feeds African children so they won't eat apes

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**Dan Robson**  
staff reporter

When James Brooks got a chance to meet the gorillas at the Toronto Zoo, it was definitely the highlight of his day.

James, the founder of 1000 Classrooms – a charity that helps protect the rare eastern lowland gorillas in the Democratic Republic of Congo – was awarded a \$250 cheque from the zoo on Tuesday to help fund his project.



PAWEL DWULIT/TORONTO STAR  
A gorilla friend at the Toronto Zoo plays with James Brooks, the boy from London, Ont., who founded the charity 1000 Classrooms. (July 7, 2009)

But the cheque was secondary to the thrill of coming face-to-face with real gorillas.

The London, Ont., boy and his family made the simian connection in an exclusive viewing area of the zoo. James, 12, and brother, David, 14, got to throw balls to the playful primates, which put on a hilarious show.

"It was so cool because you get to see their personalities," said James. "Sadiki kept hitting Shalia, and they were fighting to get the food. And then Shalia threw the enrichment ball at Sadiki."

James, who has been to the zoo five times and emails the caretakers regularly, said he could recognize Sadiki because it is the smallest gorilla.

"I don't really think of them as a different species because they are so much the same," said James, explaining his excitement at meeting them in person. "I just think of them like people."

1000 Classrooms was founded in the fall when James decided he needed to do something to help his favourite animal in the war-torn and impoverished nation.

"I want people to know what's happening in the Congo," James said.

His goal is to unite the children in 1,000 classrooms to donate just \$3 each to the Canadian Ape Alliance's Eggs for Kids program. So far, about 100 classes have signed up from across North America.

"If I do get 1,000 classrooms, I'll have educated over 20,000 people about what's happening," he said.

And word *is* getting out: In early June, James was recognized as one of the Top 20 Under 20 in Canada. An outstanding achievement for anyone, but remarkable considering the fact that he is only 12.

1000 Classrooms provides support for a group of widows and schoolchildren living near the Kahuzi-Biega Park in the Congo. The widows run a poultry farm, which generates income and provides food for the local children.

"If people have food and they have money, they won't need to hunt gorillas and they won't need to move into their habitat," James explained.

The money raised also helps educate schoolchildren on gorilla conservation and encourages them to grow up protecting the endangered animals instead of destroying them, James said.

As of June, the project had raised \$1,961.52 – enough to buy 7,846 eggs from the farm, at \$3 a dozen, for the schoolchildren.

The project added another 1,000 eggs, when Peter Evans the interim chief executive officer of the Toronto Zoo, handed James the cheque.

"He's incredible," Evans said. "I think he's got a great future in front of him."

James, who is heading into Grade 8 at Kensal Park French Immersion Public School in London, also runs an educational website about great apes (apeaware.org). He also produces content for and manages 1000classrooms.org, where he updates the projects' progress.

His efforts are particularly timely as the United Nations has declared 2009 the Year of the Gorilla, and awareness about the plight of some of our closest animal cousins is growing around the globe.

Proud parents Neil and Claire, along with David, drove to the zoo from London early Tuesday to share the experience with James.

Besides the egg donation, the zoo rewarded James with a bag full of zoo paraphernalia and a week at Muskoka Woods summer camp. And the zoo adopted a gorilla in his name.

*Visit [1000classrooms.org](http://1000classrooms.org) for more.*

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