Farewell to Junior Buddy

For almost 13 years, there was one name that represented joy, learning and wonder about jaguars: Junior Buddy. TBZ’s wonderful jaguar ambassador was born at the Zoo in February 2007 to “Springfield” the jaguar. Springfield was rescued from the Mennonite community of the same name several months earlier, where her poor health forced her to hunt sheep. Nobody knew she was pregnant, so, imagine our awe when one morning we found a newborn cub nursing with Springfield.

After surviving poor health, stress, and adjusting to a new life, Springfield, understandably, was not ready to be a full time momma; she stopped nursing after two days. TBZ Director Sharon, and the zookeepers quickly stepped in to raise the cub, and so began his amazing story.

This charismatic cub, named “Junior Buddy,” immediately bonded with humans. He enjoyed playing and showing affection even after most jaguars would become more wary and “wild.” Despite his playfulness, however, barriers were necessary, as Junior often didn’t know his own strength! The solution? An encounter cage within Junior’s exhibit where staff and guests could safely socialize with him, and show the world how intelligent his species is.
Stories about his unique birth and upbringing, and the “Junior Buddy Experience” spread and resulted in two children’s books, a yearly birthday celebration with hundreds of guests, and countless representations of Junior in media and marketing. Tourism and wildlife conservation efforts in Belize benefited greatly from having a jaguar icon who was so photogenic and personable that thousands of people could connect with. Those that admired jaguars did so even more after encountering Junior Buddy. Anyone who hated or feared them most often softened their views after being in the presence of this magnificent cat.

The overwhelmingly positive impact Junior Buddy had in Belize and beyond was never more obvious that last week when we experienced the deeply painful experience of his passing. TBZ and the world lost Junior abruptly to heart failure. The announcement of this loss caused an outpouring of love and cherished memories from thousands of people whose lives he had touched.

We thank all our friends and supporters who reached out during this extremely difficult time with encouragement. TBZ is committed to keeping Junior’s incredible legacy alive through continued awareness and education on behalf of his species.