

Newspaper Article –

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Imagine if you will that you're a young fellow who just moved to a new town. You're in a strange apartment, a strange neighborhood with neighbors you don't know. Across the hall you have two neighbors, one's a bit of a grouch and a little loud at times. The other is a more mellow fellow but he dresses funny (he likes to wear stripes all the time).

When you venture out you can see others who live in the vicinity and they're all different from the folks in your old neighborhood. The cuisine available in the area is pretty good and so is the entertainment (to tell the truth, you spend a lot of time just people watching). The really good thing is that living right next door to you are two older ladies you'd like to meet. They remind you of some of the ladies from your old stomping grounds. But you aren't quite sure how to go about meeting them. You go through those awkward moments that come with meeting someone new. You think to yourself, "Do I look good? What do I say? How's my breath? Will she like me? Will the age-thing be a factor?" You see the ladies off and on through a window or a door. You venture a "hello" from afar, but there's always something holding you back until that magic moment when it seems like a door opens and there she is.

That's the very anthropomorphic (putting human feelings onto non-humans) version of what our new young male lion has been going through lately. Actually both his neighbors across the hall wear stripes – they're tigers. The magic moment when it "seemed like a door opened" was when keepers actually did open the "howdy" door. A howdy door is what we use during the second phase of an introduction between animals that don't know each other. During the first phase they can see, smell and hear each other but no contact of any sort is allowed. In the second phase limited contact is allowed. This is often done using a howdy door which has an area of mesh or grating in it but the holes aren't big enough to allow full contact between the parties being introduced. The final phase of the introduction is when all barriers are removed and full contact is permitted.

The new male lion is a 1 ½ year-old from Denver. His move to Lee Richardson Zoo was recommended by the Lion Species Survival Program (SSP) of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). Through SSPs, zoos cooperatively manage specific species with the goal of creating and maintaining a healthy and self-sustaining population. The SSPs also coordinate efforts in research, conservation, education and even reintroduction to the wild. Upon his arrival here, our new young male lion joined two females, a 15 year-old wild born female and her 2 ½ year-old daughter that was born at Lee Richardson Zoo. When the young male was introduced to the adult female it took her no time at all to establish who was boss. With the younger female things progressed differently. After a few rocky moments at the beginning, the two younger animals seem to have ‘made friends’. As of this writing all three are together and doing well.

For some animals the process of an introduction happens in a period of hours, for others it can be days, weeks or even longer. Animal managers always hope the introduction is uneventful but some times individuals just don’t get along and you have to go back to the drawing board. There are other times when an introduction goes just fine only to have things fall apart months later for no apparent reason. And yes, there are times (many of them in fact) when after the introduction, whether it was smooth or awkward, that everyone lives happily ever after. I always hope for the smooth introduction and the happily-ever-after ending and luckily that’s usually what’s happened in my experience. We always plan for the worst though. You could say our motto is to plan for the worst and hope for the best. The introductions between the lions were done with a lot of forethought, a great deal of hand-wringing and a number of chaperones standing nearby ready to intervene if things started going wrong. This time everything went in our favor. Next time you’re at the zoo, stop by the lion exhibit and see our new trio of felines.

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