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### Summary of *Project NIM*

Project NIM is a film directed by James Marsh in 2011 and begins in the Institute for Primate Studies (IPS) in Oklahoma where a baby chimpanzee, later named Nim Chimpsky, is taken from his tranquilized and caged mother. The narrator, who is also the head researcher in this experiment, Professor Herbert Terrace (Herb), begins by explaining what the purpose of this abduction is: to determine whether or not this chimp can grow up among humans and learn their language. This would become a breakthrough discovery if humans were able to communicate with a different species and better understand what goes on in their minds. However, past experiments proved that chimps physically cannot articulate the same alphabet as humans, so this Columbia professor wants to see whether or not this ape is capable of learning sign language fluently enough to interact with other humans.

During the duration of his 26 years shown in the documentary, Nim goes through many different stages in his life, which can be simplified into four: his learning phase, being sent back to the research firm, being sold for experimentation, and finally, being rescued by an animal-rescue farm. Each phase in his life is very different from the rest and highlights different aspects of his personality and mentality.

After initially being taken from his birth-mother, Nim is assigned a foster mother by the name Stephanie LaFarge. She is a former student of Terrace's and is chosen to be Nim's

caretaker because of her adept capability of handling children, having already a few of her own at this point in time in the 1970's. Here begins the learning phase of Nim's life. After some time, it is clear that LaFarge, who may be looking out for the well-being of Nim, is not the best person to leave Nim with, considering the fact that he is the center of a potentially important and groundbreaking scientific experiment. This is because she refuses to log any of his learning progress, focuses more on him having fun and exploring his surroundings rather than learning vocabulary, and she allows him to get away with almost anything with no repercussions. An example of this would be the incident when Nim sabotages her husband's library and when she allows him to have an occasional smoke.

The documentary continues to narrate - through the means of an interview - that Terrace decides to intervene one day and hires an 18-year-old Laura-Ann Petitto, who is supposed to reinforce the scientific and research aspect of the experiment in LaFarge's home. This does not last long due to LaFarge becoming overly possessive and Nim is moved to a different home that Terrace gains permission to use from a friend. More teachers and foster parents come to join Laura and Nim in this home for the sake of the experiment. As Nim gets older, his vocabulary begins to exponentially increase, and soon enough, he is able to create sentences like, "Me Nim Banana", indicating that he wants to eat. He is said to have learned 125 words in sign language by this point, but his lack of grammar is demotivating for the researchers.

Additionally, as he grows older, he grows stronger and more dangerous because of his sharp teeth. After multiple instances of violence and teachers being sent to the hospital because of him, Nim is taken back to the IPS, and the experiment is concluded, beginning the second stage of his life. Upon arriving, it is quickly made apparent that Nim is not accustomed to his

own species. He is slowly integrated into the chimp community at the facility by the help of his former instructors and meets a kind, hippy-type caretaker, Bob Ingersoll. Ingersoll feels sympathy for Nim, who despite being an ape, is never kept caged before. Bob begins to smoke marijuana with him and entertains his sign-request to “play” often.

After a little more than a year back at the facility, the third stage of Nim’s life begins when he is purchased by the Laboratory for Experimental Medicine and Surgery in Primates (LEMSIP) as shown in the film. He is treated cruelly like any other animal at this facility. Ingersoll does not agree with this treatment and tries to find a lawyer to fight the case of animal cruelty against LEMSIP for Nim. After some time and many efforts, LEMSIP is threatened enough by the seriousness of the accusations to let him be freed by an animal-rescue farm, Black Beauty Ranch.

It is at Black Beauty Ranch where Nim begins the fourth and final stage of his life. Initially, he is kept isolated, and this causes him to become very aggressive. The owners of the ranch say to have placed a television set for him in his cage, but he ends up breaking it. When LaFarge comes to visit him after many years, he recognizes her. Unfortunately, he also recalls the fact that she abandons him early on in his life and is furious. When she enters his cage, he vents his frustration and attacks her, almost killing her.

When the documentary portrays Ingersoll arriving to visit Nim, he is still able to recall the sign for play and seems joyful once again. After Ingersoll speaks to the newer owner of the ranch, shows that he still cares for Nim by arranging for more chimps to join him in this home of his. Ingersoll argues that Nim is a social creature, especially after essentially growing up with

humans. Nim later has a child of his own with one of the other chimps that is rescued from LEMSIP and joins him in his shelter. At the age of 26, Nim dies in the year 2000.

It is still unclear as to whether or not Nim is intelligently learning language for the sake of communication during the course of the film, or if he is just learning signs of objects and actions to get what he wanted - just as a dog may learn to ask for a certain treat in a specific manner or tone. However, after learning about specific events in his life, like him refraining from murdering LaFarge or him wanting to play when seeing Ingersoll after years, it is clear that he is able to retain some level of intelligence and compassion as many humans do (*Project NIM*).

Works Cited

*Project NIM: The Documentary*. Directed by James Marsh. Roadside Attractions, 2011.