

Honoring Johnny Sala



Johnny Sala has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember.

Ever since he arrived at the San Francisco Zoo in 2000, he's been a fundamental staple for dozens of families in the Bay Area. His charisma and fun was unmatched as you saw him every family trip to the zoo. The San Francisco Zoo needs to honor this man, not just for working at the zoo for as long as he has, but for how many lives he's influenced for the better.

Growing up, Johnny has had a lifelong love of trains.

His family has taken Johnny to see Little Puffer ever since he was a little boy. Ever since that moment, Johnny has always loved that train and visits to the zoo. Little Puffer has been a safe space for other kids to enjoy at the zoo, and it only amplified Johnny's love of trains throughout his entire life.



But one thing that many don't know is that not only was Johnny a magician on the train, he was a magician playing sweet tunes. Johnny Sala and the River Rats are a local Bay Area band, and they also performed at the San Francisco Zoo itself, even later during the time where he worked on Little Puffer! He's been a whiz in the cab, and a whiz on the guitar! For years, he has been a notable figure in people's hearts for how he sang in that down to earth way, and how he loved to play music. While writing this, I've actually been listening to Johnny's band, and it's only made my fondness for him grow stronger.

In 1978, however, Little Puffer was removed from the railway. Fortunately in 1998, Johnny Sala and other volunteers at the Golden Gate Railway Museum had the chance to fix Little Puffer from the museum, resulting in it roaring back to life. And years later, he was appointed to be Little Puffer's caretaker. He now had the dream that he'd always wanted. He was now able to be an engineer and a music man. For decades, he's been the figure that so many of us love and adore. As the fantastic train was quick and rolling almost every day, Johnny's bright soul and heart made the railroad a truly special place to be, and I couldn't imagine a man like Johnny being ignored.

I was born in 2006, and I am still a proud San Francisco resident.

Right away, even before I could remember, the zoo became an instant staple for my family to take fun trips. I met Johnny before I could walk or talk, and I remember him and Little Puffer as some of my earliest moments in life.

For my entire upbringing, every single trip to the zoo was me, laser-focused on taking the fastest route to get to Johnny and Little Puffer. And I think it was Johnny's spirit that was the origin of my love for trains. For years upon years after that, my family and I cherished the trips to the zoo. And every single time we walked into the entrance and I heard that iconic whistle, my little legs sped me to the train. As much as I liked seeing the animals, my biggest love and reason for the zoo was Johnny and the train.

Train rides and visits to see Johnny have been one of the primary sources of why I am a steam train enthusiast today. This is why I am asking for Johnny to get recognition, and honor all his years as the amazing train conductor that made the zoo fun for so many.

Recently, I've heard of the new engine and I am simply outraged. I saw a photo and I was so sad that it was nothing as cool or beautiful as Little Puffer. Not only is the green box train lacking character, beauty and style, the happiness that the railway and Johnny's presence brought were also gone... it broke mine and so many others' hearts.

Recently, my mother invited me to join her family- friend's kid and herself on a trip to the zoo to chaperone. When I got there and saw the train, tears sprung into my eyes. No Johnny, no Little Puffer, and barely any smiles from the other families in the coaches. Not even the conductor was smiling. I had to be strong and not cry, but a few tears were shed.

I really hope that it's not the end of Johnny's beloved train riding the rails, but more importantly, the San Francisco Zoo needs to honor such a fundamental part of so many years of happiness this man brought. He wasn't only one of the oldest employees there, but he's also one of the longest running employees at the zoo. Johnny was the soul of the track, the smiles at the zoo, and when the train flew by, he smiled and waved, which brought waves back and smiles everywhere.

We can't watch Johnny retire and leave the zoo without recognition and love. He made my trips at the zoo pure joy, and Little Puffer was the very first steam locomotive I ever saw. Seeing that beautiful train in Johnny's shed and seeing such a fundamental part of my life stuck in a shed... just tears me apart.

Even if it will be hard to return the train back to its glory,
I still wish that everyone at the staff will honor Johnny. It seems imperative for everything that
he's done. Johnny was a bright beacon of my life, and it would mean everything if the zoo could
see how he's inspired so many kids like he did for me.
Please give this man and his train the recognition they deserve.



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Sources: YouTube, SFGATE:

<https://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/engineer-on-s-f-zoo-train-living-his-dream-2388857.php> (info and first photo source)

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