Like any good foster parent, Alan Toyne shared everything with the babies he was responsible for rearing—his bed, his dining table, his life.

And if you paid him a visit in his Bristol home during a seven-month period in 2016, you’d be impressed with his dedication to ensuring those babies learned how to climb, swing, grunt, and beat their chest—since they were a pair of lowland gorillas.

Toyne had been working for 10 years working as a zookeeper at the Bristol Zoo when he became part of the first team in the UK to hand-rear baby gorillas by working to replicate as much natural behavior as possible.

The surrogacy was necessary because Kera, one of 7 lowland gorillas at Bristol Zoo, developed pre-eclampsia, a birth complication that also occurs in humans, and her baby, later named Afia, was born 4 weeks early through an emergency C-section and rejected.

“We were the first team to use the surrogacy method of hand-rearing gorillas,” Toyne explains to the British media outlet SWNS, “other gorillas were hand-reared in the UK, but weren’t introduced to adult gorillas until they were four years old.”

The team leader of 6, Toyne, who had worked in the finance department of an engineering firm before joining a volunteer zookeeper program at Bristol Zoo in 2006, described the process as “an amazing experience.”

“I still remember the first day bringing Afia back to my home in her car seat and putting her asleep on table,” Toyne said. “My partner, Sharon, was like ‘oh my goodness’, and fell in love with her straight away.”

Unlike the other hand-rearing methods Toyne mentioned, he and his team brought Afia up side by side with the other gorillas to ensure they grew up “proper.”

“The first thing the gorillas had to learn how to do is cling onto their mothers—so we would wear these string vests,” to replicate gorilla fur, he explained. “It was all about training her how to be a proper gorilla, so you had to replicate all of the necessary factors.”

“During the day she would spend time with the gorillas, and if they came over to interact with Afia we would make sure they could—it was important to make them think she was part of the troop, as we always knew she would return to them.”

Toyne looked after both Afia and Hasani, who was also rejected by his mother after she stopped feeding him four weeks in, for around 7 months each.

The zookeeper recently wrote a memoir illustrating his unique journey with the fascinating primates in his audiobook, brilliantly-titled [*Gorillas in Our Midst*](https://amzn.to/4512W7C).

“When I first brought Afia home—gorillas all eat at the same time—so when we had our tea, we’d all eat together, having our dinner with a gorilla at the table,” Toyne told SWNS, beginning to recall all the bizarreries of living with a gorilla in the house.

“If Afia wanted to wake me up to play she would slap me on the head like a bongo drum but with Sharon, Afia would gently stroke her face.”

“Like human babies, they don’t remember sitting in a car seat: they think of themselves as gorillas.”

Alan admitted it was emotional to say goodbye to the baby gorillas at first, but he was overjoyed their hand-rearing experiences had been positive and successful.

Kera, Afia’s mom, had been reared in captivity 20 years ago, and experienced the problems that led to a re-examination of how best to hand-rear gorillas.

“Back then, if a baby gorilla needed rearing, they would go into a crèche all together, which spurs on their development and play behaviors; but the downside is they don’t understand gorilla social behavior. This meant Kera never fitted in, and was isolated,” Toyne said.