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Pepsi official will never forget his evening with Michael Jackson

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In 1986, Clay G. Small was vice president and division counsel for Pepsi Cola Co., the beverage division of PepsiCo. He was 36 and had been in the job about two years. He was also a big Michael Jackson fan.

He worked as general counsel for Frito-Lay Inc. from 1995 to 2002. Now 59 and the senior vice president of legal affairs for PepsiCo, Small lives in Dallas.

After Jackson's sudden death last week, Small decided it was right moment to put into writing details of the night he spent with Michael in 1986. He says he wrote the story because "the experience was so unique. Sitting and watching TV with a chimpanzee was unique."

Michael and Me

In 1986, Pepsi-Cola's young and charismatic president, Roger Enrico, called me to his office and summarized the telephone call he had just finished with Jay Coleman, a talent agent for rock stars.

"You're not going to believe this, but Michael wants to do another deal with us," he said.

In 1984, after the release of *Thriller*, Pepsi had sponsored Jackson's reunion tour. The Victory Tour was an enormous success for the Jacksons and Pepsi. But the success was muted by an unfortunate incident during the filming of a Pepsi ad. Wayward pyrotechnics badly burned Michael's scalp. The commercial, and the incident, added to Michael's fame but, more important, made Roger a media darling – a hard-charging executive with his finger on the pulse of pop culture.

Unfortunately, the burning incident had also created distance between the parties, especially after Michael sent us a draft of the complaint he intended to file in Los Angeles Superior Court. To avoid further adverse publicity, we agreed to pay \$1.5 million to the Michael Jackson Burn Center at Mount Sinai Hospital.



FILE/The Associated Press
Michael Jackson's menagerie included his chimp, Bubbles, and a bulldog. He also had zebras, giraffes and a touchy llama in his home zoo in Encino, Calif.

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Michael was planning a new tour to support the release of *Bad* and needed cash, which was no surprise. Roger's idea was simple: We'd fly to L.A. to meet with Michael and leave the next day.

On the Pepsi jet, we were joined by Michael's agent and attorney.

These two could only exist in L.A. Frank DiLeo had been the promo man at Epic Records for *Thriller* and was Michael's new agent. Round-shaped, with a cigar prop at all times, DiLeo carried himself like a bit player in *The Sopranos*.

John Branca, Michael's longtime, long-haired attorney, was DiLeo's laid-back foil. Branca has a famous uncle: Ralph Branca, the Brooklyn Dodgers pitcher who threw the fastball that Bobby Thomson hit over the fence – "the shot heard around the world."

Roger got to the point – "how much?" DiLeo answered that \$10 million for the tour sponsorship (double the price of the Victory Tour) was non-negotiable and that Coke was ready to pick it up if Pepsi hesitated. The flight was spent negotiating Pepsi's tour sponsorship rights.

When we landed, stretch limos took us to the Jackson family compound in Encino.

Before describing the Jackson family house, a little chronological perspective is helpful. 1986 was post *Thriller* but pre-*Neverland*. Michael was one of the most famous people in the world, had undergone only one nose surgery, and was just beginning to pale. He was a lovable oddity.

Mom and the mummy

The family's fenced, French chateau-style compound was wedged into a middle-class neighborhood and, of course, had an enormous wrought-iron gate and guard house. John Branca let us into the house and guided us to the living room. We passed the kitchen where Michael's mother, Katherine, was frying smelt – unfortunately, smelt was not on our menu.

Plainly dressed in a starched white shirt and jeans, Michael quietly greeted us and led us to the dining room. My first impression was that his skin was like none I had ever seen. It was translucent. He was in his 20s but still didn't shave. His hair, at this time his own, was long, sparkling and perfectly coifed. He sat down, nodded to Roger, and said nothing while DiLeo described the tour plans. His first words were to ask if we were ready for dinner – then the mummy appeared.

Wrapped from head to toe in gauze, a silent young woman carried to the table small tea cups and a large urn through which she poured us yogurt tea. Michael explained, in his whisper voice, that dinner would be one of his favorites – yogurt tea and cookies made without sugar. I yearned for a smelt or two.

After "dinner," the talk returned to tour plans, and Michael began to warm up. While describing his plans to tour the globe, Michael said that this time he would "set the world on fire" and then said "oops" as he touched the top of his singed head. I laughed out loud until I fielded a sour glance from Roger and realized no one else was even smiling. But Michael gave me a secret wink – I was the only suit who had appreciated his irreverent joke. As the conversation slowed, Michael asked if we would like to go to his room and watch TV.

Bubbles in overalls

Remember, this was 1986, and some of the events that made Michael a paparazzi magnet had not yet occurred.

But his bedroom was far from normal. Throughout the enormous room were 18 mannequins of multiple colors, including purple and green, in various states of undress. I suspect that Michael spoke to and played with these "friends." In the middle of the room was a floor-to-ceiling cage housing Bubbles, Michael's 3-year-old chimp.

Dressed in a diaper and Oshkosh bib overalls, Bubbles joined the party looking and acting like a normal 3-year-old, except awfully hairy. DiLeo and Branca had begged off, so sitting on the couch were Michael, Roger, Bubbles, me and Jay Coleman. And there we sat for an hour and a half, silently watching a John Wayne Western. Roger asked

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Michael if he was interested in the World Series, and Michael responded, "What's the World Series?"

Michael asked if we would like a tour of the house. Bubbles went back in his cage while the rest of us began the tour with the room next to Michael's bedroom – the Diana Ross shrine.

With a convex ceiling and white brick walls, the room looked like a wine cellar. Every square inch was covered with photos of Diana Ross from her earliest years with the Supremes. On shelves, tables and the floor were hundred of candles that Michael kept burning 24/7 to "honor his friend." We were speechless.

The next room was his dance studio with an elaborate sound system. With shiny floors and ballerina bars, it looked like any other dance studio with one exception – there were no mirrors. I asked Michael about the lack of mirrors and he responded that he did not like to watch himself dance.

A real zoo

Down the back staircase we entered the garage with the cleanest floor I have ever seen. The 12 cars were of every imaginable luxury model, from Ferrari to Mercedes, and they were all white convertibles. I asked Michael which one he liked to drive. He giggled and whispered "only that one," pointing to a VW Rabbit in the far corner.

Before entering the theater, we stopped to examine his 10-foot candy counter stocked with every type of candy known to man. On display were Michael Jackson trading cards, and I asked if I could take some to my kids. Michael grasped his hands together beside his face and said, "Yes, please do, that's exactly what they're there for." With its red plush velvet chairs and full-size movie screen, the theater was a perfect replica of a neighborhood cinema.

On the way out of the theater, we were joined by DiLeo on the way to the zoo. With zebras and giraffes, the zoo was filled with gentle animals. Except one. As we walked toward the llamas, Michael whispered that we should not get too close. Ignoring Michael's advice, DiLeo waddled right up to one and was promptly spat on and then bitten. No one even tried to stifle their laughter.

We said our goodbyes and promised to meet again the next morning. Roger steered us to the hotel for his Sambuca, espresso and cigarettes. At around 1 a.m. he announced he was leaving for New York in the morning and directed me to stay in L.A. until the contract was signed.

A few days later, Branca and I sent the contracts to our clients. I never spoke with Michael again, but two weeks later, he sent each of my children an autographed photo and sent me tickets for his show in Madison Square Garden.

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