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One Animal Researcher Refuses to Hide



(Chronicle Photo - J. David Jentsch is the latest of about a half-dozen researchers at UCLA who have been subject to violence by animal-rights extremists. "They chant, 'We will never give up,'" he says. "But neither will I.")

By Robin Wilson

Los Angeles

In the middle of the night, when a noise at his home in Sherman Oaks jerks J. David Jentsch awake, he scans a security monitor hanging from his bedroom wall. It displays six views of the house, which sits like a bunker down a steep driveway behind two wrought-iron gates. At the top of the drive, an armed guard is stationed 24 hours a day.

Back in 2009, someone set his car on fire. In November he opened his mail to find razor blades; an accompanying note claimed they were tainted with AIDS. Every few weeks, people march up and down the street in front of his home, chanting: "David Jentsch has blood on his hands!"

Mr. Jentsch, a professor of psychology and psychiatry at the University of California at Los Angeles, uses vervet monkeys in his research. That has made him a prime target in an increasingly violent campaign by animal-rights activists.

"If Jentsch won't stop when you ask nicely, when you picket in front of his house, or when you burn his car," says Jerry Vlasak, a spokesman for underground animal-rights groups, "maybe he'll stop when you hit him over the head with a two-by-four."

But Mr. Jentsch, a soft-spoken man and self-described science nerd, refuses to back down.

While other researchers at UCLA have either quit working on animals or stopped talking about it publicly, Mr. Jentsch has become an unlikely warrior. He is a champion of animal research in talks across the country and published an article in *The Journal of Neuroscience* prodding other scientists to stand up and "face the threats." Just a month after his car was firebombed, he started a group called Pro-Test for Science, which holds counterdemonstrations at UCLA and provides information arguing that animal research saves human lives.

The professor has also pushed his own university to be more aggressive in protecting scientists. And he is one of the first to contact researchers on other campuses to offer advice after they have been singled out by animal-rights attacks. "When the protesters come to my house, they chant: 'We will never give up,'" says Mr. Jentsch. "But neither will I."

Ground Zero

Mr. Jentsch, who is 38, is the latest of about a half-dozen UCLA scientists who have been subject to violence at the hands of animal-rights extremists over the past several years. All of the researchers experiment on, or supervise experiments on, nonhuman primates. Mr. Jentsch, who studies the neuroscience of drug addiction, uses more monkeys in his research than does any other lab on the campus.

The personal attacks on scientists and their homes that began during the mid-2000s marked a change in tactics for animal-rights groups, who used to vandalize labs and let animals loose. "We have gotten some significant laws that make it much harder, with bigger penalties, to go after institutions," says Frankie L. Trull, president of the Foundation for Biomedical Research, an advocacy group that supports the use of animals in medicine and science. "But as a result, campaigns to go after individuals have become more popular."

While scientists at Yale University, the University of Florida, and the University of Wisconsin at Madison have also been attacked, UCLA has become ground zero in the war over animal research. "We're in a major metropolis, the nation's second-largest media market, and we're a well-known international brand," says Phil Hampton, a UCLA spokesman. "By targeting researchers here, you raise the profile of your cause."

The university receives more than \$1-billion a year in federal and private grants and contracts, for work on 5,500 research projects. Of those, about 1,300 involve experiments on animals—150,000 of them, almost all rodents. Only 21 nonhuman primates are being used in UCLA labs, although the number has been nearly double that in the past. Fifteen of the primates are in Mr. Jentsch's laboratory. He injects the monkeys with methamphetamines to study how casual drug use leads to changes in brain chemistry and, ultimately, to drug addiction. He studies brain chemistry with images of the monkeys' brains and then, after euthanizing the animals, examining the brain tissue.

One of the first scientists at UCLA to be hit by violence was Lynn Fairbanks, a professor of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences who collaborates on research with Mr. Jentsch. In 2006 a Molotov-cocktail-like device apparently meant for her home was left on the front porch of a neighbor. The Animal Liberation Front claimed responsibility for the attack. In 2007 activists from the group threw a hammer through a window at the home of Edythe D. London, a professor of pharmacology, then snaked a garden hose inside and flooded the house. Neither Ms. Fairbanks nor Ms. London would speak with *The Chronicle*.

Dario L. Ringach, a professor of neurobiology at UCLA's medical school, has paid perhaps the greatest price so far in the battle with animal-rights protesters. An earnest man who chooses his words carefully, Mr. Ringach is clearly still pained by what animal-rights activists cost him. He quit his work on vision in monkeys in 2006 after demonstrators wearing masks repeatedly came to his home and pounded on his windows. The protests terrified his two young children, forcing Mr. Ringach and his family to flee to friends' homes.

"We were like refugees," he says. When he finally asked the FBI what he could do to protect himself, agents suggested he get a gun. "It got to the point," he says, "where it was my family or my job." He chose his family and now studies vision in human subjects. Although it's been five years since he abandoned his work on monkeys, Mr. Ringach says, "I am still angry and bitter."

It was during the attacks on Mr. Ringach that Mr. Jentsch sent a fiery note to his university's chancellor, demanding that UCLA do more to protect its scientists. At the time, he was an assistant professor, without tenure. Marie-Françoise Chesselet, who is chair of neurobiology at UCLA, was also critical of the institutional response. "The attitude of the university was hush, hush," she says. "They thought, If we give any publicity to these incidents, you're playing into their hands."

The university did establish a committee in 2006 to examine how best to protect its researchers, and it put Mr. Jentsch on the panel. Since then UCLA has become known as one of the most aggressive defenders of animal researchers in higher education. It spends \$1.4-million a year on their security, including armed guards at the researchers' homes. It has also secured a permanent injunction, barring some individual protesters—as well as groups including the Animal Liberation Front and the Animal Liberation Brigade—from threatening violence against researchers, protesting within 50 feet of their homes, and identifying individual researchers on Web sites with their home addresses and phone numbers.

Last year UCLA police arrested nine people who were charged with misdemeanors for violating an ordinance by demonstrating too close to Ms. London's home. Some of those arrested have filed a lawsuit against the university, saying the arrests violated their free-speech rights.

"It is very hard to protect researchers from a group of individuals who work in the shadows," says Kevin S. Reed, vice chancellor for legal affairs at UCLA. "We have devoted hundreds of thousands of dollars to a multipronged effort so researchers can do their work without fearing for their lives."

As a result of UCLA's effort to protect researchers, though, many of them have ended up working in the shadows themselves.



(Chronicle Photo - Protesters gather near the home of J. David Jentsch, who uses vervet monkeys in his lab at UCLA to study the neuroscience of drug addiction.)

'They Found Me'

From 2001, when Mr. Jentsch came to UCLA as an assistant professor, he knew his work with monkeys was controversial. He never allowed the university to publicize his home address, and he insisted—and still does, in spite of his public stance—that his name and photo be omitted from a glass-enclosed display of faculty members on the ground floor of Franz Hall, where he has his office.

Even though he knew he was a possible target, Mr. Jentsch was still shocked when he heard his car alarm wailing at 4 a.m. one night in March 2009. He looked outside to see his vehicle ablaze. "They found me," he says he chanted over and over to himself. "They found me."

Mr. Jentsch has a new Volvo S80 now. And he has a new home. The house he lived in when his car was set on fire was so close to the street that picketers could see inside and easily throw things through the front window.

The professor drives to the campus at about 6 a.m. six days a week to work behind two locked doors in his spare, top-floor office. Inside is a digital video recorder with wires that extend up through the ceiling tiles, attached to three cameras positioned in the hallway. The cameras allow Mr. Jentsch to monitor what's going on from his office computer. But the technology has not stopped people from harassing him. He used his cellphone to call campus police when three protesters showed up in the front row of one of his classes. Lately a mentally ill man who has read about the controversy over Mr. Jentsch's work has been visiting the professor's office and e-mailing him. "He thinks he knows who firebombed my car," says Mr. Jentsch. "He says it's Janet Jackson."

Mr. Jentsch's colleagues call him brilliant, but he is also an approachable man who wears jeans and tennis shoes to work. He grew up in a small town in south Texas, the middle child of a cookie salesman and a mother who worked for the Girl Scouts of America. Among the few personal effects in his UCLA office are photos of the two young girls his parents adopted when Mr. Jentsch was away at college (one of them was a newborn left outside on the hospital steps).

He was the first person in his family to earn a bachelor's degree. As a child he recalls being fascinated by biology—he watched every animal program that came on TV, he says, and read every animal-science book in the tiny library in Seguin, Tex. When he was 16, his parents sent him about six hours away to the University of North Texas to attend a program for mathematically and scientifically gifted students. At 18 he went to the Johns Hopkins University with two years of college credit and graduated with a bachelor's degree in behavioral biology by 20. "I always wanted to be a scientist," he says. "When science is successful, it touches so many more people than you can as a medical practitioner."

It was at North Texas that Mr. Jentsch did his first research on animals, sectioning and mounting brain tissue from dead squirrels in the lab of a biology professor. The first time he euthanized an animal was after earning his undergraduate degree, while working for a biomedical research lab near his Texas home. The experiments involved exposing rats to low levels of radiation and studying their behavior. "That hit home," he says of killing the rats by injecting them with a strong anesthetic and then removing their blood so their bodies and brains could be studied after they died. "But it's a fact of science."

Still, Mr. Jentsch counts himself an animal lover. The first thing a visitor to his home sees is a new aviary he built that stands just inside the front door and holds two tiny birds, red-eared waxbills. Then there are the two small dogs, an affenpinscher and a toy fox terrier, that Mr. Jentsch, who is unmarried and has no children, treats like babies. A hedgehog lives in a terrarium in the living room.

Actual Brain Tissue

Most of Mr. Jentsch's research at UCLA has involved rodents, but his most controversial experiments are on monkeys. He became interested in what causes people to succumb to drug addiction, he says, while he was an undergraduate at Johns Hopkins living in a rough part of Baltimore. In his neighborhood, he regularly came across homeless people who he suspected were both psychotic and drug-addicted. What causes some people who use drugs to keep using drugs, he wondered, even though they desperately want to quit? He started his work on monkeys and drug abuse, injecting the animals with cocaine, while earning his Ph.D. at Yale University.

To study the effect of drug use, he says, scientists can use imaging equipment that allows them to view a brain without being invasive. But that provides only so much information, says Mr. Jentsch. To see what kind of chemical changes the brain undergoes during drug use, he says, he must examine actual brain tissue—which involves euthanizing the animals and dissecting their brains. Over the past five years, he has received about \$4-million in federal grants from the National Institutes of Health to support his work.

In his experiments on monkeys, he says, he has found that drug use leads to a breakdown in the brain's frontal lobe, which governs impulse control. That may explain why drug abusers have such a hard time stopping their habit. On the basis of his work, other scientists at UCLA are evaluating a drug that increases the activity of neurotransmitters in that area of the brain and may improve a subject's ability to inhibit inappropriate behavior.

Mr. Jentsch is particularly reviled by animal-rights groups because he addicts monkeys to illicit drugs. Bruins for Animals, a student group at UCLA that opposes the use of animals in research, has participated in panel discussions on the campus that included Mr. Jentsch. The group does not endorse violence, but Kristy Anderson, who founded it in 2004, says she understands the anger behind the attacks on researchers and wouldn't be surprised if, sooner or later, a scientist got hurt. (Online, animal-rights extremists have referred to Mr. Jentsch as "David Tiller Jentsch," after the Kansas abortion doctor named George Tiller, who was killed in 2009 by an anti-abortion activist.)

Ms. Anderson met a reporter one night last month at an apartment she shares with Jill L. Ryther, who earned her law degree from UCLA and specializes in legal actions that affect the welfare of animals. That evening, the women were tending to their own two mixed-breed dogs, plus two sickly strays they had picked up at an animal shelter. They had also invited a friend to bring over a beagle named Freedom that had recently been adopted after it was released from a research laboratory. During the gathering, over vegan food that included spring rolls and artichoke dip, Freedom sniffed around the apartment, cowered when the front door opened, and peed on the carpet. Whenever he was approached, he lifted his left front paw, something Ms. Ryther attributed to the fact that lab researchers regularly drew his blood.

Ms. Ryther says animal research thrives because it is a big business. Researchers get federal grants for their work, churn out journal articles, and earn tenure. "Money is a huge motivating factor," she says. Yet animals are often poor subjects for studying human disease, she argues. "There are so many places with humans addicted to meth, and they are willing to do clinical trials" with drugs and other treatments that might help, she says, commenting on Mr. Jentsch's work. "Think about how different humans and animals are. You're talking about looking at the brains of primates, who never naturally get addicted to meth. What can you learn?"

The Chronicle wanted to get an answer by seeing what goes on inside Mr. Jentsch's UCLA lab. But administrators wouldn't allow it. That frustrates Mr. Jentsch, who says it makes him feel "like the little sister they locked away in a room." He says: "I'm very proud of the work I do, and I've taken enormous personal risks." The university's broad policy restricting lab access, he says, is too cautious. "I think there is a disservice to the university meeting everything with a measured voice."

The university says it bars outsiders from its animal labs because whenever it provides information on researchers' activities, there is an uptick in violence against them. "Once the information hits the Internet, we've found it ends up as fodder for people who openly pledge to kill our researchers," says Mr. Reed, the legal-affairs vice chancellor. He realizes that restricting access causes the university a public-relations problem, but "having a researcher killed or seriously injured is much worse than a PR problem."

Besides, he notes, the university's animal laboratories are routinely subject to rigorous scrutiny. "We have a veterinarian who has ultimate authority over care of all of our animals. We are regulated by federal agencies that visit both announced and unannounced."

Mr. Jentsch says that, while the university says its closed-door policy protects researchers, the secrecy surrounding his lab gives ammunition to animal-rights activists. They can claim that animals are being mistreated, he says, and there is no way for him to prove them wrong. "The idea that you can walk into a lab and animals are suffering everywhere, that there are animals bleeding in the corner, that's just patently false," says Mr. Jentsch, who says he houses his vervet monkeys in groups of two to four in cages (with swings and toys) that are 12 feet wide by 20 feet deep by 12 feet tall.

'What Gives You the Right?'

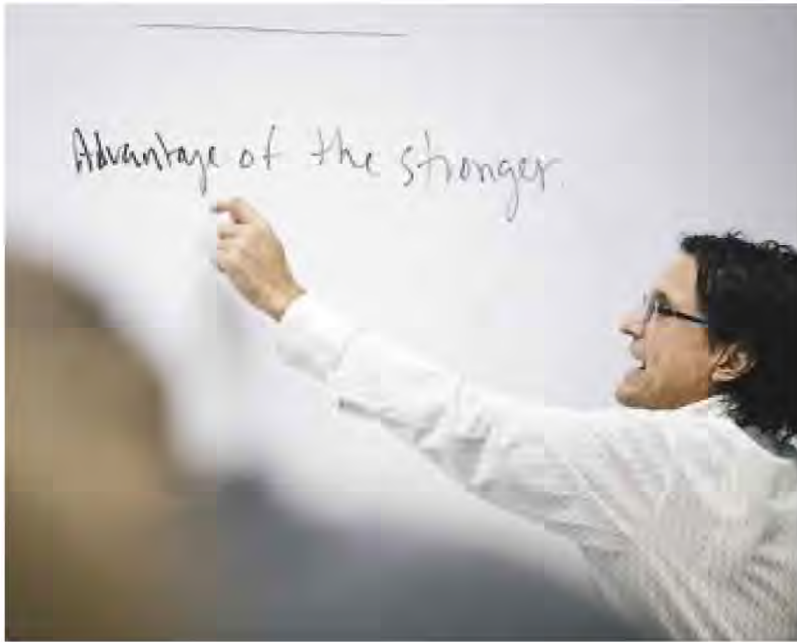
The topic of lab access came up one afternoon last month when Mr. Jentsch agreed to have lunch with Robert C. Jones, an animal-rights advocate who is an assistant professor of philosophy at California State University at Chico. Mr. Jones is not affiliated with groups that endorse violence.

The conversation between the two professors, at an L.A. sushi restaurant—Mr. Jones ordered vegetarian; Mr. Jentsch did not—turned most pointed when Mr. Jones began questioning Mr. Jentsch about what goes on in the lab. "There are instances of egregious violations with animals, and you want to say these are rare, but for every one that's publicized, who knows how many others there are?" said Mr. Jones, pointing to undercover videos that animal-rights activists contend show abuse in labs. "There is a shroud of secrecy. Why can't there be greater transparency in the lab?"

Mr. Jentsch found himself making his university's argument: that transparency wouldn't satisfy the most extreme animal-rights activists and might even antagonize some. "It wouldn't change the ones who want to torture and break me," he said.

While Mr. Jones doesn't defend those activists, he does try to explain their position. "They believe what you are doing is morally wrong, and they feel disempowered to stop it," he told Mr. Jentsch. Then he asked the question every animal-rights proponent wants answered: "What gives *you* the right to experiment on primates for the benefit of humans?"

Mr. Jentsch had a ready answer: "Normal people on the street." He likes to cite a 2009 survey by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press that found that 52 percent of the public favors the use of animals in research. "They have thought through this issue," says Mr. Jentsch, "and have acquired a comfort zone."



(Chronicle Photo - Robert C. Jones, who teaches philosophy at California State U. at Chico, questions the morality of research on animals.)

So has he, but questions like Mr. Jones's clearly make him uneasy. The lunch ended amicably, but as Mr. Jentsch drove back to the campus, he was still bothered. "What if a chimp had to suffer in miserable pain for five days, but then no one on earth would ever die of AIDS—would it be worth it?" he asked. "What if I could suffer for five days and then no one would die of AIDS? I don't know how I'd answer, but I don't agree that the answer to these things is necessarily no."

Mr. Jentsch is offended by the implication that he and other scientists are cold-hearted killers who don't think deeply about their use of animals. His research has been likened to experiments that Nazis did on hypothermia, putting Jewish people in icy-cold water until they lost consciousness and died. "You're called upon to defend what is a completely legitimate, ethical thing to do," Mr. Jentsch says of his own work. "Society has grappled with these issues and thinks using animals is legitimate. But we are constantly called upon to redefend it."

Part of the reason for that, some say, is that universities—fearful of alienating students and donors—have shirked their role in educating the public about the benefits of animal research. And scientists are so busy doing their work that they either assume that the public shares their views or will simply trust that scientists know best.

Jacque Calnan, president of an animal-research advocacy group called Americans for Medical Progress, calls it the "ostrich approach." She says universities need to tell the public about medical gains that have come from work on animals. She knows the issue firsthand, having been diagnosed with epilepsy in 1999. "If it weren't for Keppra, a drug that was developed and tested in animals, I would not be able to work," Ms. Calnan says, referring to an antiseizure medication. "We need to put a face on the patients who benefit."

But that argument doesn't persuade everyone, even within academe. Lawrence A. Hansen, a professor of neuroscience and pathology at the University of California at San Diego, is one of the doubters. "I think they are intentionally exaggerating the claims" that research on animals benefits humans, he says. Scientists experiment on animals because that's what they have been trained to do, he argues. (He himself practiced surgeries on dogs during medical school, something he now deeply regrets.) "Custom will reconcile people to any atrocity. Once you do something long enough, you don't perceive the horror of it."

Mr. Jentsch acknowledges that his own life would be easier if he just did what most scientists do and shut up about his work in the lab. "I could have reacted to that first event with my car by just disappearing," he says. "But I feel strongly about making a statement that will make conditions better for the whole community."

That's one reason he travels just as much these days to give talks about the threat of animal-rights extremists as he does to present the results of his own research. On those trips, he uses a fake name when he checks into hotels, and he carries Mace.

In the past 18 months, Mr. Jentsch has contacted six scientists at other universities after they were targeted in animal-rights attacks, to console them and advise them on what steps their universities can take to prevent future attacks. "It's something I feel I have to do, and there isn't anybody else to do this," he says.

But while he tries to present a tough exterior, Mr. Jentsch acknowledges that the violence has taken a toll. He is more skeptical now, he says, about the motivations of people he meets for the first time. And the whole experience has been painful for his parents to watch. They were at his home last November when he opened the envelope, and the razor blades, sent by animal-rights activists, fell onto the kitchen floor. (He never found out if they were actually tainted with AIDS.)

"This has hurt me a lot," says Mr. Jentsch, his eyes watering momentarily. "But I've decided I'm just not going to let them get away with it."