

Many Ways to Fulfill a Dream

Dreaming of having your own sanctuary? Check out the alternatives first!

► **By Faith Maloney**

Almost every day someone says, “You at Best Friends are living my dream. One day I want to have a big ranch and take care of lots of animals, too.”

It is a wonderful dream. But having a sanctuary is not for everyone. Buying land, kennels, catteries, hiring staff, providing food and medical care is not cheap – not to mention the potential hassles with zoning requirements and complaining neighbors.

There are myriad ways to help animals besides having one’s own sanctuary. Many of these other ways can provide the invaluable experience needed to actually start a sanctuary one day, or they can be just as fulfilling, long term, to help the animals.

Spay/Neuter Is the Key

First and foremost, get involved with some form of spay/neuter program. You can do more for the cause of homeless animals through spay/neuter than anything else. And even if you are fortunate enough to have land for a sanctuary, include some form of spay/neuter program as well. It’s the best way to reduce pet overpopulation in any community.

Check out the existing spay/neuter programs in your own area, and ask how you can help out. If no program is in place, think about starting one. There are lots of models out there – from vouchers with veterinarians to stationary or mobile clinics.

How About Foster Homes?

At the same time, check out the possibility of starting or getting involved with a foster/adoption program. I embarrassed myself a few years ago when I was talking with Cheryl Smith, founder of Wasatch Humane in Salt Lake City.



Cheryl and the organization were always on TV, and I knew they found homes for an amazing number of animals in the Salt Lake area, so I assumed they had a brick and mortar facility. When I asked where her place was, she looked at me rather oddly before telling me that they are a foster/adoption program, and that she ran the whole organization from her home. I was very impressed. She was making a huge impact with a relatively low overhead.

Work with Your Humane Society

Unfortunately, the animal welfare movement has the reputation for having internal disagreements ranging from arguments about adoption procedures to out-and-out major personality clashes. These disagreements often give rise to divisions that create yet more animal organizations, which can get quite confusing to the public, who just want to help the animals, and have no interest in getting drawn into the childish infighting that often goes on between animal groups.

Georgia found a solution to that problem when she came to our How to Start an Animal Sanctuary workshop a couple of years ago, mainly out of dissatisfaction with the existing animal agency in her hometown, but also with a dream of having her own sanctuary one day.

She wanted to help animals, but was angry and frustrated with the ineffectiveness of her local humane society. We hatched a plan together for her to get involved with the organization and try to make the much-needed changes from within.

As a successful businesswoman, Georgia had a lot to offer. She began by helping them get their animal records in order, and she brought in doughnuts and made friends. She began to see that these people were not evil killers, but people who desperately wanted to help.

The last time I checked in with her, she was on the board, and had been able to push through many changes. They weren't yet no-kill, but they were working on it. She hasn't given up on her dream of having her own place one day, but meanwhile she's helping to make a huge difference to the animals in her community.

Do You Have a Professional Skill?

Many animal organizations do not have the budget to hire top experts. If you have a skill, or any area of expertise like media, fundraising, business, or graphic arts, think about offering those skills (diplomatically, of course!) to help out.

Fundraising is the most sought-after skill in any animal work. Whether it's your own new sanctuary, or the place where you volunteer your time, everyone needs tons of money to do the job properly. Carol Sparrow and her husband, Randy Locke, both professional opera singers at the height of their careers, saw this need in their hometown of Sarasota, Florida. They created an organization called OASIS (Opera for Animals, Singing Is Saving) to put on fundraisers for local animal agencies. Their dream is to ex-

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pand their efforts one day, and include other people from the arts to help raise money for animal programs nationwide.

It's true that trying to work with an existing place doesn't always work. Perhaps the people running your local animal group are totally resistant to change. In this case, it's not a good use of your time or resources to support that group. Move on. Find someone who is doing the right thing and help them.

There are numerous other ways to learn skills you'll need if you are going to start your dream sanctuary. These are skills that can also be used to help animals now. How about taking some dog obedience training classes? One of the most common reasons for failed dog adoptions is poor behavior. People are busier than ever these days, and often don't have time to spend working out behavior problems. They need the help of an expert – so become one. Read training books, take a number of different classes, and go to dog training conferences. Whether or not you eventually have your own sanctuary, your knowledge can be an enormous help to dogs and their people.

Dog and cat grooming is also a great skill to learn. I knew of a situation where a professional groomer agreed to train Jeannie, a young lady who was working with her local shelter, for nothing, as long as she promised she would not open a new grooming shop down the road. And true to her word, Jeannie uses her new found skills to help her shelter find wonderful new homes for the dogs she grooms.

Local schools and community colleges have great computer graphics classes where you can learn programs like Pagemaker, Photoshop, and Illustrator. You can use this knowledge to create effective and eye-catching fundraising letters, brochures, etc. And to prove that you are never too old to learn, I have taken many of those classes myself, and have been able to help make some booklets, posters, and manuals for our work here at the sanctuary.

You don't need acres of land or pots of money to help the animals. Teaming up with like-minded people, using skills you already have, and looking at ways to help a program that may be struggling in your own community will achieve more for the animals than just standing back and thinking about maybe doing something sometime in the future. 🐾