

We are Our Companions

by Mary deManby

Our Companions' Co-founders Look Back...And Ahead

Webster's Dictionary defines a sanctuary as a place of refuge and protection: a consecrated place. That vision of a sacred place for homeless animals began as a dream five years ago. Today, that dream is becoming a reality as Our Companions continues to gain momentum and strength. Under the leadership of committed visionaries and with the dedication of over 130 volunteers, what was once only a paper dream is now an animal care movement that's making a difference.

Just how far has Our Companions come? While the core mission remains the same —providing a no-kill sanctuary for companion animals in need—the philosophy has expanded to create a humane movement to change how we view and respond to the needs of animals. This movement involves many components —from providing educational outreach, animal behavior training and pet rescue and adoption, to influencing legislation to better protect animals. Our Companions News takes a look at the organization's journey over the past five years—what has been learned and how we've evolved. The journey began, appropriately, in a dog training class.



The Beginning

In 2002, Susan Linker was feeling burned out from many years of working at an animal shelter. Her experience left her disillusioned about the state of animal welfare—where pets are abandoned, then warehoused, until they are either adopted or euthanized. Although she was no longer an animal welfare professional by day, she spent much of her free time thinking about her experiences at the shelter and how other organizations were beginning to manifest the no-kill philosophy. She was mentally building a place where pets would be valued no matter their age, breed, behavior and condition, and the goal for every pet would be to find a loving home.

That year Susan brought her companion dog, Abi, to a dog training class where she met Marie Joyner. Marie spent many years in the world of conformation dog shows, training and showing dogs. But her experience in that world hadn't prepared her for her newly rescued dog, Jack, a Treeing Walker Coonhound.

When Susan met Marie she recalls that, "Marie had tears in her eyes." Jack was so reactive toward men that he had to constantly be kept on a leash at home. Marie had been kicked out of several other training classes due to Jack's behavior and she knew she had to make it work because, if she returned Jack to the shelter, he surely would have been destroyed.

"We began talking and discovered we shared this feeling that something more could and should be done for companion animals. Serendipitously, we heard about 43 acres of land being given away for the purpose of building an animal sanctuary," said Susan. The two decided to visit Best Friends Animal Sanctuary in Utah, which became the model for their vision of building the sanctuary in Ashford.

“Philosophically, we knew how it could work. I had the shelter experience; Marie had the training experience. We both had the passion to do something to stop the unnecessary killing of companion animals. But we soon realized that the sanctuary was only a small part of a bigger plan. We really wanted to create a whole movement to change the status quo of how we perceive and treat our animals,” Susan recalls.

Susan quit her job and filed a proposal which ultimately granted the newly formed Our Companions the land in Ashford. Meanwhile, Marie perfected her own method of dog training on Jack, who turned out to be not only a great student but a great teacher.

With the fundamentals in place, Susan and Marie set forth to spread their message.

Building a Movement

One of the most meaningful lessons Our Companions learned during their research at Best Friends, is that in order to successfully create a no-kill community, rescue organizations need to work together.

It was with this in mind that Our Companions became a founding member of the Animal Welfare Federation of Connecticut (AWFCT). This coalition of no-kill organizations throughout the state provides a voice of solidarity within the animal welfare community and at the state legislature. Currently, a new 501 (C)(4) organization called Connecticut Votes for Animals is being formed to address the need for more aggressive legislative work to protect animals in our state.

Successes

Susan cites that one of Our Companions’ most notable programs, and one that captures the no-kill philosophy, is the Sterile Feral Program. Many people feed stray and feral cats without sterilizing them, resulting in the proliferation of cat colonies. The Sterile Feral Program empowers feral cat caregivers to Trap, Neuter and Return these cats safely back to their environment. Commonly referred to as TNR, it is the only humane and effective solution to reduce the population of feral cats long-term.

Our Companions provides the individual training, traps and vet services so caregivers can safely and humanely sterilize the cats. The program is based on Our Companions’ core belief that people really do care about animals and want to help, so it is essential for rescue organizations to engage the community with support and solutions. “People feed the cats because they don’t want to see them suffer. It’s our responsibility to explain that feeding alone will create a bigger problem. And we back our advice up with solid, supportive programs,” according to Susan.

Another successful program is the Animal HelpLine, which helps re-home animals who are at risk of being left at shelters or euthanized. If possible, Our Companions tries to prevent homelessness of animals through education and training. As with the Sterile Feral program, Our Companions’ volunteers empower pet owners with information and tools to make the right decisions.

“Initially, Our Companions referred callers to other organizations that operated shelters. But volunteers quickly learned that those same organizations were also at capacity and referring callers to other organizations. We realized that owners had no where to go,” recalls Susan. Today, twelve trained Animal HelpLine volunteers handle about 350 calls a month, and each animal is treated as an individual case. Last year, Our Companions found homes for over 491 pets through the Animal HelpLine program and all of this was accomplished with community cooperation and without a shelter.

Thanks to Jack, Marie's rescued dog, the Canine College was founded. This program gives behaviorally challenged dogs a second chance by utilizing volunteers to teach owners how to better manage their dogs and create a home environment where the dog can remain a part of the family. According to Marie, "We learned through one of our first rescues (see sidebar) that sometimes owners give up their animals because of behavior problems that could be resolved easily through education. Most people care about their dogs and want to keep them." Our Companions offers on-going, low-cost training classes focusing on dogs with behavioral issues. In addition, our volunteer trainers will provide in-home consultations and training when needed.

Our Companions' goal is to prevent dogs from entering or re-entering shelters. Susan observes that dogs often have behavior problems that land them in shelters where there is little or no follow-up once they are adopted. Much like the Sterile Feral program and Animal HelpLine, the Canine College program engages the community to help their pets and find effective solutions, rather than abandoning them in shelters.

Learning Steps Are Building Blocks

As Our Companions moves into the next phase of its development, the organization is preparing for progress by looking back at what has worked and planning for the future. Our Companions' staff, a select group of volunteers and the Board are developing a strategic plan to guide the organization through the next three-five years.

According to Susan, the biggest challenge is changing the way we view and react to our pets. "When we started this organization, we thought the sanctuary was going to solve all our problems. While it's an important benchmark, the reality is we need to educate the public that the issues facing pets cannot be resolved by building more shelters – or sanctuaries. When you are euthanizing 35% of animals in shelters who are basically healthy, it's clear that education and prevention are.

Perception is just as powerful as the actual rescue. One of the strongest statements about our upcoming sanctuary is to physically manifest our no-kill philosophy. All animals at the sanctuary will be rescued, rehabilitated and re-homed. If they never find a home, the sanctuary will become their home and they will not be destroyed.

Susan says that Our Companions first cottage will debut next year and that ultimately 16 cottages will shelter about 2,000 companion animals each a year. Our Companions has also been building the human infrastructure and currently has five employees (3 full time and 2 part time), an 18-person Board of Directors and over 130 active volunteers.

"We strive to practice what we preach. It's the work of the animal welfare community to lead the no-kill movement by example. This means not only condemning the unnecessary killing of animals, but to engage, empower and provide the community with real humane options for them and the animals they love."

Our Companions' Firsts

The First Rescue

Ryan's original family didn't understand his exuberant behavior. Although he was no longer a puppy, he acted like one, nipping and biting at people. His family felt they had no other choice but to tie Ryan to objects whenever he was in the house. Needless to say, this wasn't a good situation for Ryan.

Our Companions was called to find Ryan a new home. The key to making Ryan's next home successful was training him and teaching his family how to manage his behavior. The Burgess family adopted Ryan and four years later he is still a beloved member of the Burgess home.



The First Donor

The late Katherine (K.K.) McLane had the honor of being Our Companions' first donor. Her generous donation of \$5,000 helped to launch Our Companions. Fundraising has progressed from \$39,000 in 2003, to \$445,000 in 2007. Because of Katherine's generosity and her place as the first donor, the leadership giving society—the McLane Society—is named after her.

