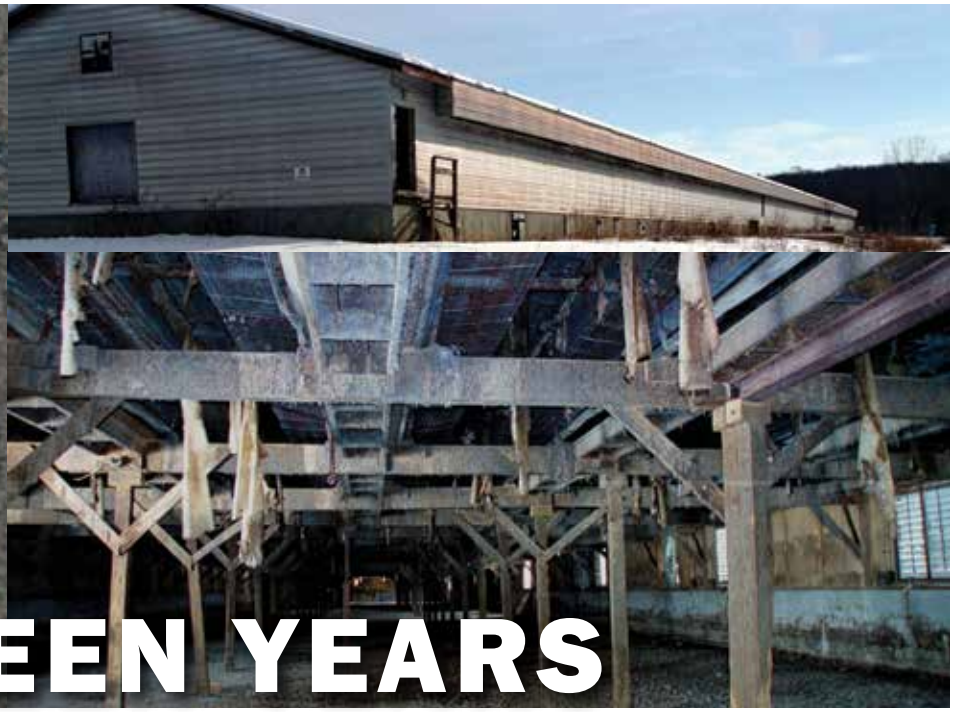
OUR COMPANIONS news
Vol. 11, Issue 3
Fall 2017



FIFTEEN YEARS

From FACTORY FARM *to Sanctuary*

Plus

- *Act Locally to Help Animals in Need*
- *The Understated but Invaluable Role of Service Dogs*
- *Keep Your Pets, Get Rid of Your Allergies*

Something to Chew On

Dear Friends,

In March 2002, somewhere over the Pacific Ocean on a flight to Maui for our wedding, I turned to my then-fiancé Mitchell and said, "So, there's this land in Ashford that I wanted to talk to you about." Having recently relocated from Fairfield County where he'd lived for most of his life, his response was, "What's Ashford?"

Then there was the time Marie Joyner, Our Companions Co-Founder, and I called my sister from Kanab, Utah on our first trip to Best Friends Animals Sanctuary to share with her the name we'd just come up with for our new organization. Upon our urging, she logged onto the Internet (it was the waning days of dial-up, years before smart phones) to see if any other local rescues already had the name "Our Companions" and to determine if ourcompanions.org was available.

While preparing this edition of Our Companions News, I have spent a lot of time reminiscing about these and other pivotal moments from the early days. If you've been with us since the beginning, I am sure you will love this edition's trip down memory lane. And if you're relatively new to OC, I hope you enjoy learning about the extraordinary journey that led us to this point, our 15th anniversary.

Thank you for reading, and thank you for being part of the OC family.

Susan B. Linker, Chief Executive Officer

Dear Friends,

While I wasn't yet involved when Our Companions first began, I've been around long enough to appreciate just how far the organization has come. When I was introduced to OC last decade, it was still very much in the "planning stage," which was a euphemism for, "Susan and her team hadn't yet raised the money to build the Sanctuary."

Eventually, thanks to the leadership of so many in the community, we did raise the funds to begin construction. And while we have a ways to go to fully realize our vision – not just at the Sanctuary, but for the organization as a whole – it is a time for celebration.

In addition to acknowledging our 15th anniversary this year, we are on the cusp of opening 3 new rescue cottages at the Sanctuary, doubling the number of homeless animals we can rescue and rehabilitate in Ashford. Furthermore, our many life-saving programs continue to grow, impacting more and more lives (animal and human) in and around Connecticut.

So please join me in wishing Our Companions a Happy 15th Anniversary!

On behalf of the Board of Directors and Advisors, our 400 volunteers and 21 staff members, I thank you for your support of our work. It is because of you that we are able to fulfill our promise to do the right thing for animals.

Maria das Neves, Board Chair

860-242-9999

OurCompanions.org

P.O. Box 956
Manchester, CT
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OUR COMPANIONS
ANIMAL RESCUE

About Our Companions News

Our Companions News is published three times per year by Our Companions Animal Rescue, a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization.

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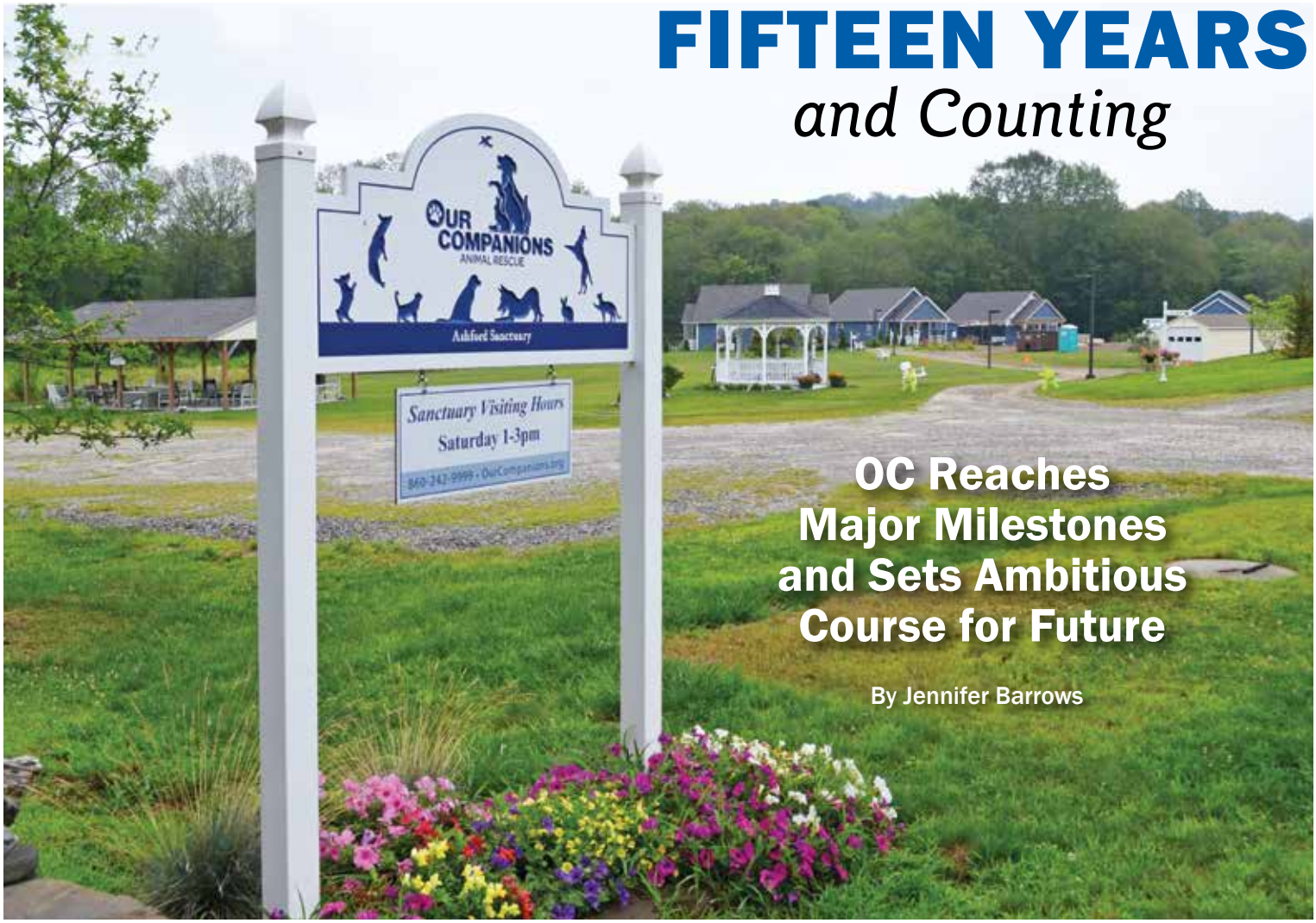
FIFTEEN YEARS *and Counting*



OC Reaches Major Milestones and Sets Ambitious Course for Future

By Jennifer Barrows

It all started with just a piece of land.

It didn't seem like much, despite the fact that it encompassed 43 acres. There was no hint of the idyllic sanctuary that would one day grace the property. Back then Our Companions was just a handful of fledgling programs that were being developed and undertaken by a few individuals with a shared dream. That, along with a dubious inheritance: a couple of colossal and decaying buildings on the aforementioned piece of land – once ironically comprising a deplorably inhumane factory farm for chickens.

"Our Companions, though it existed, didn't seem like much at that time, fifteen years ago," says CEO Susan Linker. "People who are relatively new to our organization see this beautiful village for homeless animals – our amazing Sanctuary in Ashford, Connecticut – and they may not realize what our roots were."

Indeed, one could say our roots were humble. In fact, it's a testament to the power of the shared vision of a future Sanctuary that volunteers and donors were enticed to join Our Companions that early on. Join they did – in droves – and together over the last 15 years, we have worked consistently and patiently to alter the face of animal rescue in Connecticut. Our approach has been multi-faceted, with the Sanctuary constituting only one aspect of our work. Though we had no choice but to start from nothing and steadily chip away at the very complex issues surrounding animal welfare, over time we have witnessed the burgeoning of our programs and our organization, and we know we are making a difference.

As we take pride in the growth and success of Our Companions, those of us who have been with the organization for many of these 15 years remember with a touch of fondness our very unglamorous beginnings. Instead of the impressive present day state-of-the-art Valerie Friedman Program Center, OC's World Headquarters was in Susan's tiny basement in Bloomfield, CT. In fact, it was here that the *OC News* magazine editorial board would meet, cozily gathered around a small table. Many programs were born and many early plans were hatched at that table.

Before the Sanctuary came into existence, we had foster homes for homeless pets in our charge and though we had immediate and growing success with our Helpline as well as the Sterile Feral Program for TNR (Trap-Neuter-Return for community cats), we did not have a place for the actual TNR training. In fact, we were using yet another part of the Linkers' homestead – this time, their driveway, probably to the chagrin of their neighbors. Dog training was conducted in parking lots and at a doggie daycare center, complete with boarding barking dogs in the background.

On yet another level, our advocacy efforts had begun, but were still in their infancy. We certainly had high hopes that our legislative work with CT Votes for Animals would result in much-needed policy changes to improve

Massive chicken coops where thousands of animals suffered, is now the site of our Ashford Sanctuary

Chicken coops that stood on the Sanctuary land

2004 - Then-Attorney General Blumenthal, in Bushnell Park, helps launch the news of the future Sanctuary in Ashford

2008 - (L) Longtime volunteer Sue King in OC's first office in Susan Linker's spare room upstairs (R) OC volunteer Jeannie Kitchens signing in volunteers at the orientation we used to hold in a church basement

the lives of companion animals in Connecticut, but no one knew how successful those efforts would be – and they've only just begun.

In the ensuing years, alchemy was at work in the Linker basement, though perhaps none of us realized it at the time, since there were still so many hurdles to clear to make the shared dream of a Sanctuary a reality. Looking back, there seemed to be a sort of Perfect Storm brewing – a magical, synergistic storm – wherein all of the many components that made up OC – from its donors to its volunteers; from the Helpline to our public advocacy and the dozens of programs in between – all elements were conspiring to bring us to a point where we would begin experiencing nearly exponential growth beginning in 2012. While all these ingredients were simmering, however, there were day-to-day frustrations and delays in the trenches, as OC sought approval for the establishment of its Sanctuary.

"The process seemed nearly interminable," says Susan Linker. "It took us seven years to get the Sanctuary program approved by the Town of Ashford, get the site design engineered and prepared, obtain permission for a septic system, acquire permissions regarding zoning and wetlands requirements, et cetera. It was so slow going, with painful, protracted delays – it seemed like we would never get to the good stuff."

With the health department permit finally granted in April 2012, Phase One of Sanctuary construction officially began two months later, and OC really took off. Then, in early 2013, OC opened its 6,000 square-foot Program Center in Manchester to house its programs and to support expansion into other areas, including the establishment of a Canine College Program and monthly Meet and Greet events, as well as many educational offerings.

"Of the 15 years we've been in existence as an organization, the last five years have seen tremendous growth for Our Companions," agrees Susan Linker. "This is particularly evident when you compare our annual budgets over the years, our number of volunteers, and the size of our staff. The combination of realizing our Sanctuary and our Program Center essentially helped us to expand exponentially. Everything else was in place; we just had nowhere to house anything. Once we did, we hit the ground running and never looked back – well until now, to celebrate how far we've come."

OC's future plans are evolving, and are just as ambitious. We are conducting a feasibility study to explore the expansion of our Valerie Friedman Program Center to include a nonprofit veterinary hospital that would provide affordable wellness care for pets owned by people in financial need. Expanding access to affordable veterinary care is critically needed to prevent pet homelessness, unnecessary suffering and euthanasia of animals in our community.

"It's become clear that preventative wellness care is an essential component of the future of animal rescue, and we are eager to provide a resource that so many people and animals desperately need," says Susan Linker.

Long-range plans at the Sanctuary entail building ten more cottages as well as kennels for incoming pets, and a building for social gatherings. Farther down the road, there are plans to develop housing support programs, expanded behavioral programs for cats, and to more proactively provide our services to pets living in the underserved areas of our state. And of course, OC will remain at the forefront of any efforts to improve the lives of animals through legislative change.

All of these aspirations are focused on our original fundamental goal of targeting the root causes of pet homelessness and animal suffering and making a permanent impact on the people and pets in our community. Through all of these many efforts we will continue to fulfill a promise that has been at our core since the beginning: to always do the right thing for animals regardless of the challenge or cost. We thank you for sharing our vision and joining us on this exciting journey.

(L) 2009 - OC volunteer dog trainer Daryl with Rowdy, OC's longtime evaluation dog (R) 2010 - OC volunteer, Paul Johnson, who is now OC's Office Manager, in OC's second office, Susan's basement

2009 - OC's first vehicle, the Spay Wagon, picking up a load of cat food from Liberty Tax

2010 - OC volunteer trainers, Deanna and Anne, used to hold classes in parking lots before OC had the Program Center

Milestone Timeline

2002: Received a gift of 43 acres of land in Ashford, CT and founded the organization, establishing it as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

2008: Successfully completed our first capital campaign (the "demolition phase"), raising $300,000 to demolish massive chicken coops (ironically, the land previously had been used as a factory farm. These defunct facilities were the largest buildings in Ashford).

2011: Successfully completed Phase One of our capital campaign, raising nearly $1,000,000 to conduct site work on the property, perform environmental restoration, and build the first rescue cottage.

2012: Conducted master plan site work and environmental restoration, opened first Rescue Cottages, added garage, generator, welcome center, and dog park.

2013: Opened the Valerie Friedman Program Center in Manchester, CT. This 6,000 square-foot facility houses the organization's administrative office, training programs, volunteer orientations, myriad programs supporting people and pets, and its pet "Meet and Greet "events.

2013: Successfully completed Phase Two of our capital campaign, raising $650,000 for the construction of two more cottages and related site work; built a pavilion for educational events and gatherings; and created the Remembrance Wall, constructed out of the remnants of the factory farm, which pays tribute to the land's history and provides an educational display about the impacts of factory farming.

2015: Procured four additional acres adjacent to the existing property in Ashford which includes a 900 square-foot home which is used for meetings, individualized dog trainings and our Buddy Project which teaches at-risk children to train homeless dogs.

2017: Completed construction of three new cottages, doubling the capacity for housing previously homeless animals.

2017: Celebrated our 15th Anniversary and launched a fundraising initiative, the Our Companions 15th Anniversary Challenge!

YOUR TOWN *Needs You*

Act Locally to Help Animals in Need

By Tammy Wunsch

Many Connecticut residents are not aware that their town may have a municipal animal control shelter servicing the immediate area. Such shelters may be overlooked due to their being housed in an out-of-the-way location, such as at a transfer station or a municipal public works facility. Yet these shelters, most likely operating on a shoe-string, would benefit greatly from even minimal involvement from people like you who care deeply about animals.

Animal Control Officers (ACOs) manage municipal shelters in Connecticut, and each shelter is governed by an individual town or region. These municipal shelters have responsibilities for managing animal adoptions, issuing dog licenses, investigating rabies-related incidents, and addressing wildlife nuisances in their local areas.

Municipal shelters also strive to educate the public about responsible pet ownership, in an effort to minimize the incidence of pet neglect and abuse. They work hard to ensure that the animals in their charge receive proper care while in the shelter and have the best chance of getting adopted. While it's almost certain that these shelters could use your help, each has its own policies regarding how it utilizes volunteers and what kinds of donations it can accept. Take a few moments to check online to see if your municipal animal shelter has a website and/or Facebook page that may detail how you can be of assistance. Many shelters post information about their adoptable animals as well as supplies that they need. If you don't find an online presence, call your Town Office or your police department and ask for contact information for your municipal shelter.

Every municipal shelter has its own policies, procedures, and needs, yet there are some

Joy - Fairfield shelter, Staffordshire Bull Terrier & Mastiff

Missy - Meriden shelter, Pit Bull Terrier

Bullet - New Britain shelter, Pit Bull Terrier

Shelton shelter, 11 Brewster Lane

Manchester, South Windsor, East Hartford Regional Shelter

basic elements shared by most. Monetary donations are almost always needed and appreciated, but before you write that check, find out if the town has a dedicated fund for the shelter. You want to be sure your money is going where you intend it to go. Another option is to ascertain if the shelter has a local veterinarian with whom it works. There may be an account for veterinary care for shelter pets to which you can donate.

Many shelters grant volunteers direct access to the animals and would appreciate assistance with dog walking and animal socialization. There are numerous other ways to contribute, in the event that the shelter does not allow direct interaction with animals due to liability concerns. For example, they may need help promoting adoptable pets on social media or websites.

Our Companions encourages all Connecticut residents – our large extended family of supporters, donors, volunteers and community members – to reach out and support our local shelters. Remember the animals in our own back yard often are the most in need of our help. And although Our Companions is always looking for wonderful forever homes for its adoptable pets, we would be remiss if we didn't give a huge "plug" to our local shelters as places very worthy of your support, and a reputable resource for adopting your next furry friend.

A Few Examples of Local Shelters' Efforts

New Britain – ACO Paula Keller arranges for volunteers to walk dogs and answer phones. The shelter uses its Facebook page to share information on adoptable pets and post requests for needed resources. Food is always needed – Purina One dry and canned food – and money is always appreciated to offset the cost of vet bills. Donations may be made to their dedicated fund, New Britain Pound Pals, LLC, and mailed to Animal Control, c/o The New Britain Police, 10 Chestnut Street, New Britain, CT 06052.

Ledyard – This municipal shelter states on its website that they need towels, blankets, toys for cats and dogs, and treats. They also would like Advantix for dogs and Frontline for cats and happily accept gift cards to Wal-Mart or any local pet store. Liability limits the use of volunteers from working directly with the animals, but they can use volunteers for projects. They are currently seeking volunteers who are able to put up fencing around a grassy area to create a space for prospective adopters to interact with the animals.

Bridgeport – The largest municipal shelter in Connecticut, has a new City Employee Volunteer program. Volunteers assist the ACO in walking the dogs daily and helping the animals become more adoptable. They request that you follow their Facebook page – Bridgeport Connecticut Animal Control – for their latest fundraising efforts and donation requests.

Preston – This shelter welcomes donations of canned or dry dog and cat food, dog and cat toys and treats, and blankets and towels. They also have a TARA Fund which provides money for medical care for needy pets. If interested in donating, send a check made payable to the Town of Preston – designate the donation for the TARA Fund – to Preston Town Hall, 389 Route 2, Preston, CT 06365. You can also drop checks off at the First Selectman's Office.

Plainfield – This shelter appreciates all kinds of donations, specifically dry and canned dog food, treats, toys, towels, dog collars, dog leashes, and blankets. They also are seeking to replace their old resting benches with Kuranda dog beds so that the dogs are more comfortable. Anyone interested in donating a bed may visit their webpage and click on a link to purchase the beds at wholesale prices.

Fairfield – This shelter always appreciates donations to the shelter, especially blankets, dog and cat carriers, monetary contributions, and food for the animals.

It has been an exciting spring and summer at the Sanctuary! A successful one million dollar capital campaign last year enabled us to begin Phase Three of construction which will add three new cottages to the Sanctuary, doubling the number of animals we can house and care for.

While still far from our ultimate goal of 16 cottages, this significant expansion will enable us to more effectively meet the needs of animals in the community through our unique, rehabilitative care. Below are some photos so you can see the progress made in the last few months. We plan on opening the new buildings in January and hope you will come to visit us soon!

APRIL

MAY

JULY

A Legislative Win For Animals in Connecticut

Effective Advocacy Yields a Major Legislative Win for Animals in CT

As you may recall from the Spring 2016 edition of *Our Companions News* magazine, Our Companions has been working with several private animal shelters, Animal Control Officers, CT Votes for Animals and key lawmakers for several years to address a critical issue in animal welfare: creating humane standards for private, nonprofit animal shelters. As a result of this new law, private animal shelters must now follow humane regulations and be subject to inspection just like municipal animal shelters, veterinary clinics, animal importers, pet shops, kennels, and training and grooming facilities in Connecticut.

Believe it or not, prior to the existence of this law, private animal shelters were exempt from adhering to any humane care or facility standards. Even if a facility received multiple public complaints, Animal Control had no legal authority to inspect the shelter or intervene until the conditions escalated to a point where the animals were in imminent danger and an arrest warrant could be issued via Connecticut's animal cruelty statute. With statutory shelter standards in place, animals may be saved from these hazardous situations, and State and local municipalities will be spared the associated costs of late intervention.

While most private shelters are well run, some shelters have a history of housing animals in deplorable conditions. Several recent high-profile animal cruelty cases in Connecticut offered a glimpse of how well-intentioned rescue groups were causing severe harm to animals in the absence of enforced standards of care.

Thanks to more than two years of hard work and advocacy, during this legislative session the Connecticut Legislature unanimously passed a bill that effectively fills this void in animal protection.

Effective October 1, 2017, it will be a law in our state that all private animal shelters and rescue organizations be held to humane facility and animal care requirements.

This is a major step forward in Connecticut's longtime efforts to ensure that animals in our shelters remain safe and well cared for. On behalf of Our Companions Animal Rescue, we thank you so much for your support of this important work and for making successes like this possible.

The Understated but Invaluable Role of Service Dogs

Helping Humans Retain Their Dignity and Independence

By Kelly Alver

Our Companions often fields questions on how to find an appropriate service dog. There are a number of resources and organizations available across the country that can provide assistance and here are some tips to help you get started.

First, there is often some confusion about what a service dog is. Service dogs differ from therapy and emotional support dogs in the following ways:

• Service dogs assist individuals with physical or psychological disabilities, including visual impairments by performing a specific task, for example, opening a door or assisting the owner with mobility. They are trained to do work and do not engage with the public while supporting their owners. Service dogs are given public access, which is required by law.

• Therapy dogs are trained to go out in public and engage with individuals other than their owners, for example, visiting nursing homes or hospitals, or providing support to children in school- or library-based reading programs. Therapy dogs must be invited into public places because they do not have the same access rights as service dogs.

• Emotional support dogs provide comfort to their owners to help ease anxiety or depression. As with therapy dogs, emotional support dogs do not have access rights and must be invited into public places.

Connecting with the right organization

Finding the right service dog depends upon the individual's circumstances and the level of support required. A guide dog, for example, provides a high level of support with mobility and navigation for people who are visually impaired. Someone who is wheelchair-bound may require a different level of support that includes assistance with physical tasks such as picking up objects, getting in and out of bed, or turning light switches on or off.

We recommend doing some homework and researching several organizations that have trained dogs for your particular needs to determine if there is a good fit between you and the organization. Among some of the factors to consider are the organization's reputation, how long they have been training service dogs, how they obtain the dogs or breed them, and how the dogs are raised and trained.

Look for a reputable organization that has been training dogs for decades. Some organizations breed their own dogs or partner with certain breeders for the purpose of raising service dogs. There are also some groups that rescue dogs from animal shelters and train them as service dogs. Visit sites such as www.assistancedogsinternational.org for additional information and resources.

Most organizations use an in-depth screening process to ensure the right match between you and the dog. Medical information may be required, so you may want to speak to your physician in advance in case he or she must complete any forms. Each organization is different, but it can take from a few months to a year or more to be matched with a suitable service dog.

Going it alone

If a service dog can't be found for your unique situation, you may consider

training your own dog. In that case, we suggest finding a trainer who has the background and experience training service dogs.

Choosing the right dog from a reputable breeder is also important. There are some traits necessary for a canine to be successful as a service dog (whether you are working with an established organization or you are selecting your own dog to train). These include having a good temperament and calm demeanor, being highly trainable and possessing the ability to focus on their handler.

Consider the level of support you need, which could determine the breed that would work best for your specific situation. German Shepherds, for example, are often used as guide dogs because they have a high drive to learn and are very teachable. On the other hand, Border Collies are constantly looking for work to do and are better suited to assist someone who needs help with specific tasks.

"Another important consideration is the dog's size," says Robert Casey, Certified Professional Dog Trainer-Knowledge Assessed (CPDT-KA) and owner of ProDog Services in Bristol, Connecticut. "The dog's size should align with the duties he or she is being asked to perform. For example, a Yorkshire Terrier would not be a good match for an individual who has balance problems. Instead, a taller dog would be better able to help the person stay upright."

Caring for a service dog

The costs associated with having a service dog may vary. Many organizations cover the dog's expenses until the canine is placed. Once you receive the dog, you become financially responsible and must ensure that he or she receives proper attention, including good nutrition, a comfortable and supportive home environment, and timely and adequate veterinary care.

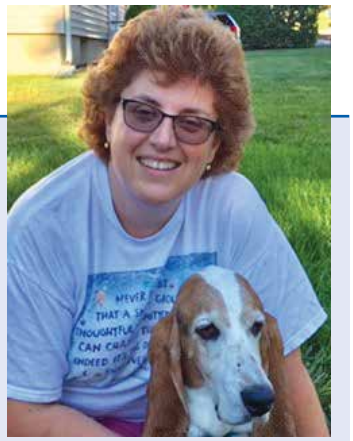
Service dogs also must stay active and have regular exercise in order to provide optimal assistance over time, which will enable their owners to maintain greater mobility and live life as independently as possible, for as long as possible. These service animals – so eager to help and offer their unconditional love – usually become close companions and cherished family members.

Leave a Legacy for the Animals

Become a Member of Our Companion's Forever Home Society

We need our wonderful community of supporters to help ensure that our Sanctuary, as well as our programs and advocacy efforts, will continue to improve the lives of companion animals far into the future. By including Our Companions in your estate plans, you will become a member of the *Forever Home Society*. Your gift will both improve the lives of deserving animals and ensure that Our Companions is here to do the right thing for animals for generations to come.

Below, is a current listing of the *Forever Home Society* members – we hope you will consider adding your name to this list.



Donor Feature

Anne Llewellyn, Forever Home Society Member

"When I became a volunteer, I had no idea how much Our Companions was going to change my life. I adopted my handsome boy, Ralphie; developed a passion for dog training (and training their families), and learned more about the animal welfare issues facing our community. I wanted to make sure that Our Companions will be able to continue to provide its programs for many years to come so that volunteers and clients can continue to benefit from all that Our Companions has done and will do."

If you have already included Our Companions in your estate plans, please let us know so we can welcome you as a member of the Forever Home Society. To learn more, please contact Susan Linker at (860) 242-9999, ext. 301 or email SusanL@OurCompanions.org.

Legal Language and Tax ID

If you wish to name Our Companions in your will or estate plans, we should be named as: Our Companions Domestic Animal Sanctuary, DBA Our Companions Animal Rescue • Legal Address: P.O. Box 956 Manchester, CT 06045 • Tax ID number: 41-2047734

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Mr. Alfred and Mrs. Helen Wilke
Mr. Edward and Mrs. Kathleen Young
Dr. Gordon and Mrs. Kim Zimmermann
*Deceased

Our Companions Announces...

Help us unlock $150,000 for Sanctuary Operations!

These are exciting times! With the construction of three more home-like rescue cottages nearly complete, we are closer than ever to realizing our original vision of having a campus with over a dozen rescue cottages that can provide our unique from of rescue and rehabilitation for our community's most vulnerable animals.

Our Sanctuary, the only one of its kind in New England, provides a comforting, enriching environment for our communities' most vulnerable animals (those who are older, traumatized, abused, or neglected). At the Sanctuary, they are attended to by loving staff and volunteers who help them heal from past trauma and prepare them for adoption. Thankfully, every day, homeless cats and dogs in our care are transformed from scared, timid and injured animals into content, playful, trusting pets who are ready for their forever homes.

While we still have more cottages to build, the Sanctuary campus has never felt more complete. More importantly, the number of lives we can now impact has never been greater.

As the Sanctuary expands, along with the many other programs at our 6,000 square-foot Valerie Friedman Program Center, so do our costs. Being completely reliant on donations, it is critical that we grow our base of support.

With this in mind, a small group of generous donors have come together to form the Our Companions 15th Anniversary Challenge.

If we can raise $900,000 for our Annual Fund by Dec. 31, 2017, these Challengers will collectively donate $150,000 for our Sanctuary operations.

We hope you will help us take advantage of this tremendous opportunity and unlock $150,000 by making a generous gift today.

Together, we can meet this Challenge and provide comfort, care, and compassion for even more abused and neglected cats and dogs now and in the future.

Thank you for your consideration and your kindness.

Wednesdays with Gretchen

by Mary deManbey

Our Companions has come a long way since its early days in 2006 when the organization's "world headquarters" was housed in the basement of CEO Susan Linker's home. The Sanctuary hadn't been built yet – but that didn't matter to then-new volunteer Gretchen LaBau.

When her friend told her about the ambitious plans Our Companions Animal Rescue had for the future, Gretchen didn't hesitate to contact CEO Susan Linker to see how she could contribute her time and talents. She had just retired from her career at The Renbrook School, where she had worked as an art teacher, and later, Director of Admission.

The idea of creating an animal sanctuary resonated deeply with Gretchen, who has always been a devoted advocate for animals. In fact, years ago, she was so moved by the plight of the burros in Death Valley that she rescued one of them; and at present, she shares her home with Norman, a handsome grey cat she adopted through Our Companions.

Currently, as she has for the past 11 years, she works every Wednesday at the Our Companions Program Center in Manchester, lending her support to whatever needs to be done. "I find it very satisfying to help keep the organization running and do what I can to help animals in some way," says Gretchen.

In addition to her office work, Gretchen has been active in years past on the Our Companions Board of Directors, and is currently serving on the Advisory Board. "Gretchen is so down to earth," says Susan Linker. "She's always there for us. Her consistency and dedication have been inspiring."

Susan relates how Gretchen was there for Our Companions during the very early days when the Sanctuary had not yet been built, and the land was being prepared. "She never missed a single land cleanup in those days – and bear in mind, there was nothing glamorous about Our Companions during our early years! I am so grateful that she has stayed with us, and can share our joy in all that we have accomplished."

Another organization Gretchen became actively involved in as a result of her volunteering at Our Companions is Connecticut Votes for Animals (www.ctvotesforanimals.org). In this capacity, she has both made monetary contributions and contacted state legislators about bills pertaining to animal welfare. Gretchen is proud that CT Votes for Animals was instrumental in getting legislation passed that requires nonprofit animal shelters to comply with humane animal care and facility standards.

What would she say to someone who was considering volunteering at Our Companions? "I think Our Companions is an incredible organization with many opportunities to become involved. It is both exciting and rewarding for me to be a volunteer and to know that I am helping many animals to have a better life."

Our Companions would like to take this opportunity to thank Gretchen for her many years of service to the animals – they (and we) are incredibly lucky to have her!

Gretchen and Norman

Norman

Gretchen and Susan Linker hauling debris from the old chicken coops

Gretchen hauling debris from the factory farm

Autumn is the perfect time to do some exploring in the quiet corner of our lovely state. So while you're driving up I-84, take exit 69 and enjoy some leaf-peeping, visit some orchards, state parks, and stop by our peaceful Sanctuary, which is open to the community every Saturday from 1 p.m. until 3 p.m.

Visiting hours are hosted by knowledgeable staff and volunteers who will be thrilled to introduce you to the many animals recovering and rehabilitating at the Sanctuary. You will also get a sneak peek at the new buildings that will be opening in January. Our home-like atmosphere is the perfect setting to plunk down into a comfy chair and visit with our sweet and friendly animals -- and human socialization is very important for them during their rehabilitation.

While there, you can also learn more about volunteer opportunities and some of the many ways you can become involved in the wonderful work we do. We hope to see you soon -- the animals are eagerly waiting and will be ready to greet you!

Our Companions Animal Sanctuary, 46 Floeting Road, Ashford, CT 06278

Technically Speaking

Keep Your Pets, Get Rid of Your Allergies

By Lyn Garson, CVT, CCRP

My allergy test results produced a lengthy list of common offenders, from dust to various trees, but I was shocked to hear the top two – dogs and cats! The allergist's response? "I'm not going to advise you to leave your veterinary career because that's just not practical, you have to work. What you need to do is get rid of all your pets."

Life without animals was inconceivable. I became determined to find other ways of managing allergy symptoms. That was 30 years ago, and while I still deal with allergies today, I've never parted with any of my pets or reconsidered my line of work because of them.

According to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, approximately 50 million people in the United States suffer from allergies. Of these, three in 10 are allergic to dogs and cats, with cat allergies twice as common as those from dogs. All allergies are caused by a reaction to a specific protein. Airborne protein particles are so tiny that they can easily cling to surfaces within the environment, or remain suspended in the air and inhaled. These proteins, referred to as allergens, trigger allergy symptoms in certain people, or more specifically, an overreaction of the immune system. So regarding pet allergies, it is not the fur itself or even the dander (dried skin flakes) that cause reactions but rather the specific proteins found within dander, skin, saliva, and urine. Neither the length of a cat's coat nor the breed of cat is of significance. Even having "hairless" breeds or shaving the cat doesn't alleviate allergy symptoms because all cats still groom/lick their skin, releasing proteins into the air. That said, human reactions can vary from cat to cat. It is also important to consider that pet hair not only collects but can carry other allergens such as dust, pollen or mold, which a person may be allergic to instead of, or in addition to, the pet itself.

People experience varying levels of severity with regard to pet allergy symptoms – from red, watery or swollen eyes, excessive sneezing, nasal congestion and/or runny nose, to itchy skin, shortness of breath, wheezing and coughing, to name a few. Reactions may intensify the more a person is exposed to allergens. Severe allergies may be life-threatening. Since allergies can develop at any age and some symptoms mimic other illnesses, such as the common cold, it is always best to consult your doctor or allergist for appropriate testing.

The best method of alleviating allergy symptoms is to avoid what you are allergic to. As an analogy, think of your body as a cup: allergens are cumulative and each time you encounter an allergen, your cup begins to fill. When too many allergens enter the cup, they overflow and if you are susceptible, you experience a reaction. So if your top priority is to keep your pets, focus on reducing as many allergens as possible by following these tips:

Environmental Changes

Regularly dust and vacuum household surfaces, including corners, and wipe down walls. Use a vacuum with a HEPA filter, keeping filters and dust containers clean. If possible, replace carpeting with hardwood floors, and choose blinds instead of fabric curtains or drapes. Leather or vinyl furniture is preferred over furniture that is upholstered with fabric that can trap allergen particles. Swap your current pillow for a hypoallergenic type. Frequently wash couch covers, pet bedding and towels in hot water.

Designate one pet-free room, preferably the bedroom. Consider purchasing freestanding air purifiers with High-Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) filtration for your bedroom and other living areas. Use air conditioning in your home and vehicle. Keep windows closed and avoid using window fans that can pull allergens from the outdoors.

Personal Changes

Allergy medications are available in both over-the-counter and prescription strength. Traditional immunotherapy is commonly used to treat allergies by injecting a small amount of allergen into a person's skin on their arm. These allergy shots are typically administered weekly for several months, and over time gradually introduce higher levels of allergen into the system, with increasingly longer intervals between treatments. The entire desensitizing process may take several years but since immunology actually changes the immune system, the positive effects can be life-long. A procedure called Rush immunotherapy works on a much more rapid desensitizing schedule and may be worth talking about with your doctor.

Pet Changes

Bathing pets mitigates allergens, but only for a few days. Frequent bathing may actually cause the skin to dry out and increase the problem. Daily brushing or combing is an effective method of reducing allergens – and moistening the fur before grooming can be especially effective.

Managing your allergies takes work and planning, but by making some lifestyle changes, both you and your pets can live much happier and healthier lives – together!

Technically Speaking is written by Certified Veterinary Technician, Lyn T. Garson, to address basic information on animal health issues and how they needn't be barriers to adopting a great pet.

Technically Speaking

To submit a question for consideration in a future edition of Technically Speaking, call us at 860-242-9999, ext. 301, or e-mail editor@ourcompanions.org.

The Scoop

Black Cats: So Beautiful, Yet So Misunderstood

By William Wilson

It cannot be denied that Looney Tunes' Sylvester (a black and white cat) is forever trying to catch and dine on poor hapless Tweety. It's also true that The Cat in the Hat (another black and white cat) sure did make a mess of things for those children before their mother got home. And yes, it tends to be black cats that are pretty consistently depicted hanging around witches and warlocks at certain times of the year.

Let's just say that black cats do not have the most endearing representation in popular culture. Even when they are not being featured in horror fiction such as Edgar Allan Poe's, "The Black Cat" or in Halloween-themed décor, some people still think of black cats as a foreboding harbinger of misfortune. In the United States and elsewhere, black cats are often viewed negatively and with apprehension. I recently spent some time with Karen Aseltine, Our Companions Feline Behavior Manager, to discuss the folklore of black cats.

Why are black cats often stigmatized?

Many cat enthusiasts attribute black cats' bad reputation to their associations with the satanic. Apparently, Pope Gregory IX officially characterized black cats as a feline incarnation of the devil and claimed that they should be burned. Ironically, later on, when the Black Plague hit, some believed the disease could have been better contained if there had been a healthy population of cats in existence.

Similarly, black cats specifically have historically been linked with witchcraft, an earth-based religion which, for some reason early on was maligned as having satanic ties, when in fact, Satan is a Christian concept. All this rumor did was to create and perpetuate a distrust of black cats that still lingers to this day. Certain

groups even believed that witches could transform between their human shape and that of a black cat or reincarnate as black cats upon their deaths. Considering this historical context along with the negative associations of the color black (e.g., fear, mystery, death, evil), it may not be a surprise that black cats are so misunderstood.

However, it is important to note that not everyone squirms at the thought of black cats. These shadowy felines are considered good luck in parts of the British Isles, and ancient Egyptians chose black cats as companions to gain favor with the goddess Bastet, often symbolized as a black cat in religious and mythological iconography. Similarly, 18th century pirates and sailors considered black cats as symbols of fortune, though the buccaneers made their judgments based on the direction the cat walked (toward them meant bad luck; away from them meant good luck).

Do these superstitions have ramifications?

There appear to be mixed findings regarding whether black cat stereotypes impact the likelihood that these animals are adopted in shelter situations. A 2012 study in Anthrozoos, the Journal of the International Society for Anthrozoology, determined that feline typecasting can adversely impact adoptions, and a 2002 study by the University of California-Davis found that black cats are more likely to be euthanized. Some shelters and rescue groups even relate anecdotal evidence indicating that black cats are less likely to be adopted.

On the other hand, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) claims that this trend is a myth and provides evidence to counter it. According to their data, black cats are adopted at rates more than ten percent higher than the next closest color. The organization's analysis partially attributes the proliferation of the adoption rate myth to the fact that more black cats enter the shelter system than those of other colors.

Regardless of the superstitions, it is hard to deny that black cats are exquisitely beautiful; and human companions of black cats would most assuredly insist that they are just as loving as their white, orange, grey, or calico counterparts.

Interestingly, the black stigma is not confined to cats alone. Many shelters in the U.S. report that they often have a more difficult time finding homes for black dogs too. Animals appear to have no concept of their own fur color, and fortunately for us, they don't waste their time judging our exterior appearance either. Animals of any color can be the most gentle and loving teachers, just by their example.

Karen Aseltine is the Feline Behavior Manager and Caregiver at the Our Companions Sanctuary. Karen is a Certified Cat Behavior Counselor and serves as one of our resident "kitty psychologists." She receives questions every day about cat behavior. This column will highlight the most commonly asked questions. The Scoop

To submit a question for consideration in a future edition of The Scoop, call us at 860-242-9999, ext. 301, or e-mail editor@ourcompanions.org.

Marie's Den

Respecting People Who are Afraid of Dogs

By Jessica Beganski

Those of us who share our lives with a dog value the bond we have with our canine friends. In exchange for providing for their basic needs, dogs offer us their unconditional love and affection, hours of entertainment, and companionship. It's no wonder that 48% of the households in America have a dog.

Imagine, though, that you are one of the millions of people who fear dogs, either because of a past negative experience or a lack of early and positive contact with dogs. Consider further that dogs are all but unavoidable in today's society – they are increasingly valued members of the American family who frequently accompany their humans outside the confines of the home and yard.

Regardless of your dog's size, disposition or what you think you know about your dog's behavior, your dog may feel like a threat to someone who is afraid. How can we, as responsible dog owners, respect others who may have very different feelings about our dogs? Marie Joyner, Our Companions Canine Operations Director, has advice all dog owners can use to be more considerate:

Respect Other People's Personal Space

Anyone can be fearful of dogs – and these people can be anywhere; at the park, delivering your mail, running past your house or walking on a trail. While out with your four-legged companion, it's a good practice to assume that no one wants to interact with your dog unless they tell you that your dog may approach them. If your dog approaches someone, do not say "he doesn't bite" or "he's friendly." To the person afraid of dogs, your dog – anyone's dog – is a threat.

Leash Your Dog Every Time You're In Public

Even if it's not legally required, it is a best practice to leash your dog each and every time you leave your home and yard. Not only does leashing ensure your dog won't run up to someone who may be terrified at the sight of a dog running up to them, but it protects your dog from countless hazards.

Train Your Dog

Responsible dog owners train their dogs to have good manners. Marie stresses that owners should work on teaching strong attention skills – especially for those times when their dog is interested in someone or something it should stay away from. Furthermore, she recommends that you have a strong recall (calling the dog's name and having him reliably come back to you) on your dog for those times he gets away from you.

Provide a Safe Place for Your Dog to Go When People Come Over

Unless you're absolutely sure your guests want to visit with your dog while visiting you, Marie suggests that you provide a safe place for him to be while you entertain your guests.

Children and Dogs

Many young children are afraid of dogs because they don't have experience with them. As dog owners, it is our responsibility to ensure that our dog is not the one dog who teaches a child that they really do have something to fear. The guidance Marie gives above is even more important when kids are around.

However, if a child is nervous around your dog, yet also is interested in interacting, Marie recommends that you proceed with caution, taking small steps to help build the child's confidence.

Have the child observe from a distance; if comfortable, offer the child the opportunity to pet your dog's side while you're controlling the dog's head. Many kids don't like petting under the dog's head or mouth – it's the part of the dog that's often wet with drool and has all the sharp teeth!

If that goes well, you can teach the child how to give a treat with a flat palm to prevent fingers from getting nibbled.

Marie's advice not only protects the general public from negative interactions with our dogs, but also protects our dogs from potential dangers.

Our Companions Canine Operations Director, Marie Joyner, receives questions every day about dogs and their behavioral issues. Marie's Den answers some of the more commonly asked questions.

Marie's Den

To submit a question for consideration in a future edition of Marie's Den, call us at 860-242-9999, ext. 301, or e-mail editor@ourcompanions.org.

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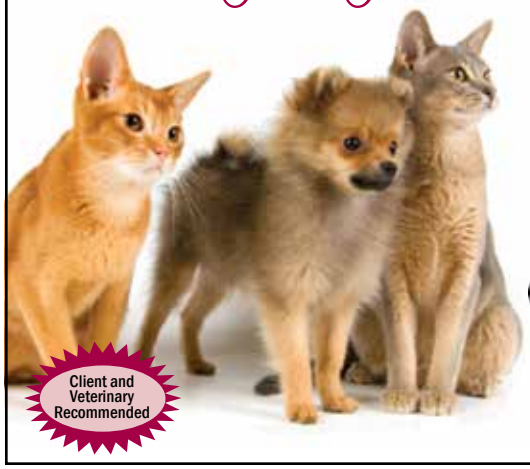

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Visit our OurCompanions.org for full job descriptions and volunteer requirements.