

## The Kindred Spirits of Animal Advocates

Recently, I attended the funeral of Thomas "Ski" Wasileski. I met Ski and his lovely wife, Katie, when they became volunteers in the early years of Chatham Animal Rescue and Education (CARE). CARE was just getting off the ground and was truly a grassroots organization. There were about a dozen volunteers who did everything, from serving as board members and on several committees, to providing foster homes for often multiple animals, in addition to organizing and participating in every fundraiser and adoption event. We also attended various county meetings to help create or improve animal related policies, procedures, and shelter facilities. It was hard work and took a lot of stamina. If just a few of us would have dropped the ball CARE would have likely fizzled out. It took at least 15 years to build the organization to a place where it had enough traction and volunteers to allow some of us "old-timers" to step back and take a break.

Ski's passing was sudden and quite a shock to everyone who knew him. At his funeral there was standing room only. Much of the original

### the Canine Coach

by Valerie Broadway



animal rescue gang was there. These days we generally see each other in passing (usually at a vet's office with a pet in tow). All of us came to the funeral individually, to remember Ski and support Katie. As we each made eye contact with one another it was clear we were so pleased to see each other. We were kindred spirits who without words deeply knew and understood each other.

We are a family of sorts. What we understand about each other is this. When people say someone ought to do something about that neglected animal, or help that injured dog or cat, we learned that we were the "someones". All of us have helped when others didn't. We've been in dumpsters pulling kittens out of trash bags. We've approached a total stranger to talk to them about improving the life of the

pregnant dog in their yard on a three foot chain. We've stopped when no one else would and picked up the bloody and dirty body of an animal that was hit by a car.

Animal rescue people have no typical demographic as to age, race, religion, financial status, political affiliation, or rural verses city dweller. However, the vast majority are female. Ski was an exception in this case. He and Katie both seemed to be in it equally, although I did hear that Ski may have brought home more animals to foster than Katie. He couldn't resist helping, especially in cases of a needy mother with puppies.

The majority of animal rescue volunteers have full-time jobs, families, volunteer with at least one other organization, and often lead active church lives. Ski was able to fit more in his lifetime than almost anyone I know. In addition to his family life, and while volunteering with CARE, this retired Army veteran earned a PhD, became a university professor, volunteered with several other organizations, and had an active church life.

Animal welfare advocacy is similar to "a calling", and people do it even though it isn't

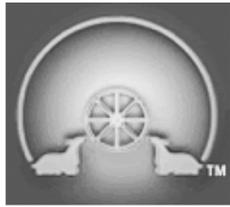
always easy. For those who recognize they have this "calling", I recommend becoming affiliated with an animal rescue group. Established organizations often cover many of the costs associated with helping animals; like veterinary care and food. These days the exposure animals get from being posted on rescue group websites can make all the difference in quickly finding permanent homes. There is also the camaraderie and emotional support that comes from being associated with others who think like you. It can be reassuring to discover you are not alone in the trenches.

Animal advocates need to pace themselves, or they can suffer from burnout. Compassion fatigue is common in the animal rescue world, as with those who are advocates for the homeless population, and foster children. It is also can afflict social services professionals, and mental health practitioners. The concern people have for others can be so consuming that it takes the joy out of their own lives; even leading some to suicide. Take care of yourself, and don't become overwhelmed. I recommend taking breaks from fostering from time to time. Reconnect with your family and your own pets. Determine how many and what type of foster animals you can comfortably handle at a time, and be firm about sticking to it. The work animal advocates do to make changes in society is a marathon, so you have to pace yourself.

The work CARE volunteers have done over the years has saved thousands of animals in Chatham County and improved the lives of thousands more. Approaching animal rescue thoughtfully and purposefully is the key to continuing to see progress, while at the same time allowing volunteers to be able to enjoy all aspects of their lives. I would like to send out a huge "Thank you!" to Ski and Katie and to everyone who has stepped off the sidelines and taken action to help animals in need.

*Valerie Broadway, the Canine Coach, is a dog trainer and behavioral specialist. For more information, call 919-542-4726 or visit [www.caninecoachingservices.com](http://www.caninecoachingservices.com).*

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