

ON BEING A HERO

by Linda Mack



I loved my job as a field officer for Animal Control in spite of the parts of the job that were heartbreaking and other parts that were unpleasant to different degrees. Most of my days were exciting, rewarding, entertaining and fun.

As an officer of the law, I wore a badge and carried a ticket book to enforce the law as it pertained to animals. My ticket book, besides being a tool of law enforcement, magnified my persona as the evil dog-catcher in the eyes of certain members of the public, but my fellow officers and I also got to be heroes on occasion.

Every day I woke up wondering what new adventures might happen during the workday. Nearly every day I learned something new--about animals and animal behavior, and more than I wanted to know about human behavior. Being able to read animal expressions and intentions was a useful skill. I enjoyed absorbing information about all kinds of different animals, especially how they communicate. Dogs don't hide their feelings or intentions. If you know what to look for, perceiving the difference between a dog that sincerely wants to bite you and one

that only wants to look ferocious is easy—and useful.

Animal Control maintained a close association with veterinarians all over the city. When I worked the evening or night shift, I often spent time at the Emergency Vet because most night emergency calls involved injured animals. Sometimes I assisted with treatment of minor injuries if the clinic was busy. Since only one vet clinic was available for 24-hour emergencies in our city in the 1980s, the single veterinarian on

duty was often swamped. Removing porcupine quills, assisting in the splinting of simple fractures, cutting painful mats from the coats of severely neglected animals, and taking care of other relatively minor conditions were common activities for me in the late night and early morning hours while the vet was busy saving lives. The emergency vet, Dr. Ted, was a hero to animals and to animal owners nearly every night.

Being a hero is gratifying, even on the smallest scale. One of the early times I was lucky enough to save the day was the day I was called to “do something” about a squirrel in someone's house.

When I got there, the entire family—mother, father and two young children--was on edge, everybody clucking and pointing at a barricade of furniture and boxes at the entrance to the kitchen. A squirrel had come in through a kitchen window and had been terrorizing the family for hours before they thought to call Animal Control.

I went around the outside of the house to a back door in order to enter the kitchen, taking my heavy leather gloves with me. A kitchen window was open about 6 inches. It opened onto the corner of an L-shaped kitchen counter.

The terrified squirrel was on an

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open top shelf at the far end of one leg of the counter, behind some decorative tableware. Nothing was broken, but the ceramics appeared endangered. I opened the kitchen window as far as it would go. The

squirrel made little chirps when I moved toward it. As I reached up to move some cups the squirrel did an end run around a cream pitcher, flung itself onto the counter and ran out the window. Nothing broke. That was it. Instant hero. The mother shed tears of gratitude, and the rest of the family thanked

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me over and over. Later they sent a thank you card to the shelter saying how wonderful and professional I was and how much they appreciated our services. Members of the public who didn't hate us were generous with their thanks when we helped out with animal problems.

Another time I went to a house near Thornton Creek in North Seattle to capture a rat that had come up through the toilet into the bathroom (Yes, that happens.). The woman who lived in the house had recently had back surgery. She was unable to bend over or turn her head. She apologized for having to call Animal Control over "something so trivial," but she was physically unable to take care of the problem herself. Not everyone in her situation felt that the problem was trivial.

I closed myself in the bathroom intent on capturing the rodent under a three-gallon plastic bucket. My habit was to call all animals "Punkin" as I was working with them. "Come on, Punkin', get out of there. That's it, get in the tub. Hold it! Punkin', hold still! Get back in there!"

Outside the bathroom door I

heard the homeowner laughing and saying, "Stop it, stop it! Please! I can't laugh. It hurts!" Luckily, the rat cooperated within a few minutes and I was able to take it away.

The woman said, "You're my hero, and you made my day. I was feeling so sorry for myself, but I'm feeling a whole lot better now. Thank you."

She also sent a card, along with a box of cookies, to the shelter.

Another episode, which could have ended tragically, resolved peacefully because of my experience with and affinity for dogs—and with some grace and a more than a small amount of luck. I was assigned an emergency call. Two large dogs were fighting and no one could get them to stop.

Both owners were at the scene.

The two dogs had previously been friendly with one another and the owners were afraid that one of them had "gone crazy or had rabies or something."

When I arrived at the designated address, I could hear the ruckus coming from the back yard. A neighbor had been waiting for me. "They're trying to kill each other. I don't think you can do anything. I think they should have called the police, but the police would probably shoot 'em."

Several people were watching the dogs from a distance. The dogs appeared to be fighting. Both were

standing on their hind legs. Their heads were close together whipping back and forth as if they were biting one another. They were making noise—snarling, shrieking, growling—neither dog appeared to be winning. As I approached them, I saw that the chain collar of one of the dogs was twisted around the lower jaw of the other. People behind me were telling me about how the dogs had always been so nice and friendly. They had lived next door to one another for years. I took hold of the collar one of the dogs. She looked like a golden-retriever mix. I talked to them both, trying to calm them down. "It's ok. It's ok. Take it easy, Punkins. Take it easy. We can fix this." The other dog, another mixed breed of about the same size as the golden, was more freaked out than the dog I was holding. He was wearing the chain collar that was twisted tightly around the golden's lower jaw, held in place behind her lower incisors. The more the dogs pulled, the tighter the loop

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around her bottom teeth became.

The dogs' owners were behind me, still wary of approaching their animals. I said, "They aren't fighting. This one's collar is caught on this one's mouth. (nodding toward each dog in turn) I need somebody to help calm them and move them so we can get them untangled."

Both owners came and put hands on their dogs, helping to settle them as I tried to maneuver their heads to free the golden's jaw. The procedure took a few minutes of wrangling and gentling, and adrenaline surges all around, but we finally succeeded

in freeing the dogs.

The dogs yelped and licked and jumped for joy. Neither dog was injured.

My favorite hero episode happened late one afternoon when I received a call to assist the police who were entering an unoccupied house to execute a search warrant.

All four officers took out their weapons when I insisted on going up to the door to see what we would be dealing with. I imagine they planned to shoot the dogs, not me, but I was between them and the dogs as I walked up to the house.

No humans were in the house, as expected, but the officers had been surprised by the dogs. Normally they knew if there would be dogs in a target house and called Animal Control in advance to meet them. Usually two or more AC Officers were dispatched to handle these kinds of calls. One officer would roll a big garbage can in the door to fend off the dog(s) while another officer or officers would capture the dog(s) with a “come-along” stick—a metal pole with a retractable noose. The process was tricky, but it was effective. I only heard about one time when reinforcements had to be called in to sedate an animal before a warrant could be executed.

Reinforcements were from the Department of Fish and Game. Their techniques were usually needed for Mountain Lions or Bears that were too close to residential areas, but they helped Animal Control with other problems involving wild or dangerous animals, too.

The dogs at this house were a big surprise to the police officers. They fully expected an empty house. I

was assigned the call because I was the nearest field officer. The other field officers were in different quarters of the City, at least 30 minutes or more away.

I arrived at the house within ten minutes of receiving the emergency call. Four police officers were on the sidewalk outside a chain link fence. Two officers were the ones origi-

nally detailed to execute a search warrant and two of the officers arrived as backup shortly before I got there. One of the original officers had a key to the house. This was supposed to be a simple search of an unoccupied residence, but after opening the front door, dogs came running and barking from somewhere at the back of the house. The officers barely managed to slam the screen door behind them as they ran back down the walk and out the front gate. All four officers took out their weapons when I insisted on going up to the door to see what we would be dealing with. I imagine they planned to shoot the dogs, not me, but I was between them and the dogs as I walked up to the house. None of them offered to go with me.

I walked up three steps to the small cement front porch. The front door was at right angles to the porch. I saw two beautiful Dobermans on the other side of the screen. They had started barking as I walked toward the porch, and they barked louder when I was able to see them up close, but they didn't

lunge at the screen door. They were sleek, with show-cropped ears, and they looked like they were barking with excitement rather than malice. Both were wearing nice collars—one red and one blue—with licenses and rabies tags attached.

Ordinarily, protective or vicious dogs would be trying their best to destroy any barrier between them and whatever they perceived as the enemy. That would be me, but I didn't seem to be a serious threat to them. On a hunch I said loudly, “Sit!” and gave the hand signal to sit.

Both dogs immediately stopped barking and sat.

They remained in place when I opened the screen a little. I opened it a little more, put leashes over their heads, and walked them down to the front gate. None of the officers moved to open the gate for us. They just stared at the dogs, while keeping a respectful distance. I opened the gate and took the dogs to my truck, where I lifted them into cages--still with no help from the police, who were busy putting their weapons away. The backup officers got into their patrol car and drove away. The other two officers said a brief “thank you” before getting on with executing their search warrant. I filled out my paperwork and drove away with the friendly Dobermans. I did not expect a thank you card this time, but I felt like a superhero anyway and grinned all the way back to the shelter. ♦



Linda Mack is a retired Animal Control Officer originally from Reno.