

Excerpts from *The Pet Corner*

January 2004

With winter sitting right atop us, we all need to exercise extra caution while driving on icy roads. We all need to slow down and take into consideration that it is not easy to stop when roads are snow-covered and slippery. When you see an animal trotting alongside the road, please slow down as you would for a child. Anticipate that it could dart out into the road at any moment. Animals are like people in some respects. Some show more sense than others. I've seen a dog look both ways before crossing a street, and I've seen others dash out into traffic without a moment's hesitation. When you see a dog running free, you don't know what its next action will be and you need to do the thinking. You need to expect that he might run in front of your car.

As a pet owner, the best thing you can do to prevent such a tragedy is to have your dog on a leash at all times when you are outside your home or fence. I would love to be able to let my dog run loose and have a great time. I know he would love it too. But the world is a big dangerous place, and we need to do everything we can to keep our pets safe.

Since the cold weather won't be going away for a few months, here are some tips from the Humane Society for keeping your pets safe and healthy through the winter.

- 1) If you keep your pet outside, make sure it always has dry shelter and warm bedding and fresh (not frozen!) water. During the recent very cold temperatures, there were many reports of animals being left out in the cold without adequate shelter.
- 2) When the temperatures dip into the single digits, it's best to bring pets into the house.
- 3) Check your pet's paws for signs of frostbite and if you suspect it, contact your veterinarian as soon as possible.
- 4) Keep snow removal salt and antifreeze stored in tight containers and out of reach of children and pets. When walking your pets, remove salt from their paws and watch out for antifreeze spills. Antifreeze can be deadly!
- 5) Trying to stay warm, cats sometimes climb into car engines. Knock on the hood and honk the horn before starting your vehicle. Even if your own cat is in the house, a stray one might have looked for a warm place to spend the night.
- 6) Staying warm requires extra calories. Talk to your vet about how to feed your pets during the cold weather.

February 2004

This month I turned to my job as a book merchandiser for a little inspiration. I stock the book departments in several local stores, and some of the best-selling books nowadays have to do with diet, health and fitness. At the beginning of a new year, folks are always ready to turn over a new leaf, shed extra pounds and eat healthy. (Especially after eating too many holiday goodies!) I recently read an article about something else that can have positive health benefits—pet ownership! There is good evidence that pet owners tend to have lower cholesterol and blood pressure levels than non-pet owners. Maybe that's because if you have a pet you must get up and get moving, even when you'd rather nap. The dog must be walked, the cat's litter box has to be cleaned. You have to feed them, groom them, and play with them. One study suggests owning a pet, especially a dog, can increase a person's survival after having a heart attack. Older people who own dogs or cats are less likely to be depressed and are often more active and less lonely. Children who are exposed to pets early in life tend to have fewer allergies.

I think it's harder to concentrate on what's wrong in your life when you've got someone who is always happy to see you. A dog's wagging tail and cat's contented purr can be wonderfully cathartic when you're not feeling well or you have the blues. A friend of mine who suffered from migraines once told me that whenever she was ill, her cats would come and lay by her as if they knew she was sick and needed their comfort. Just petting an animal can be a great stress reliever. When we had our horse, if I was feeling worried or stressed about something, I would go out and visit with him, give him some treats and a good grooming. It was kind of like the old TV program, Mr. Ed. While Staccato couldn't talk, he was a very good listener.

Of course, pet ownership isn't for everyone. There are some very good reasons for not having an animal in your life. Living situations and lifestyles need to be taken into consideration. People who are very busy or who must move or travel frequently would find owning a pet difficult at best. It always breaks my heart to see a dog or cat that has been surrendered to the shelter because its owner moved away. If having a pet will cause you more distress than good, then that isn't healthy for you or the animal. Weigh the pros and cons about owning a pet before you take on the responsibility.

March 2004

I'm not sure what made me think about her. It's been nearly twenty years and she wasn't even my dog. I guess there are some things you can never put from your mind, and the memory of that ghost of a dog hungrily wolfing down my dog's pan of food is one of those things that will stay with me forever.

It was a good thing our Juno was such a sweet, gentle dog. She might have tipped the scales at 80lbs, but she would never harm another of her kind. I think maybe Juno knew that this particular dog was desperate for food. The first day it happened, I just waited for the poor thing to be done eating and to run off, and then I refilled Juno's dish. After a couple of days of this, I tried to get close enough to see if the stray wore a collar, but as if very afraid she bolted whenever I got too close. I thought I glimpsed some nasty-looking cuts on her gaunt face and could only wonder how she'd gotten them. I didn't know where she came from but I did know that whatever this dog had been through recently, it was not pleasant.

At that time one of the local radio stations ran a public service announcement every afternoon called Dog-Gone. If your dog was missing or you had found a dog, you could call in and they would describe the animal on the air. If someone recognized the dog, they could call in and be given the person's phone number to contact them. It had worked once when Juno had gone missing for a day. We'd called in and a short time later got a call from someone a mile or so away who said she was lying on their porch. I decided to give it a try and see if I could locate this dog's owner, even though I knew she'd been missing from her home for some time.

I always figured St. Francis, patron saint of animals, must have been looking out for this stray. It wasn't long before I got a call from someone who said their dog had been stolen a couple of weeks earlier. They described her, and then I asked her name. It was Brandy. The ghost dog happened to be eating another pan of food I'd put out. I stuck my head out the kitchen door and called, "Brandy." Her head came up and she looked toward me, almost as if unbelieving she had heard that name. I told the caller I thought this might be her dog and to come out and have a look. All the while I prayed Brandy, if it was she, didn't run off again.

The family arrived in a beater car and the minute she saw them, Brandy ran to her people and fell at their feet, rolling around in pure delight that she'd at last been found. I can still remember how happy they were to have their dog back. They told me they thought Brandy had been stolen to be used for dog fighting, even though there wasn't a fighting bone in her body. That no doubt explained the wicked cuts and bites. When she'd proved not to be a fighting dog, she'd been dumped. I can't even begin to imagine the sort of people who treat animals this way, but it still happens today.

That day, nearly twenty years ago, I was just glad to see Brandy reunited with her family. They wanted to give me something for finding her. I wouldn't have taken it and anyway, I didn't find Brandy. She found us. I told them if they wanted to do something, to make a contribution to the animal shelter. I don't

know if they ever did, but I remember watching them drive away, Brandy sitting in the back seat of the big old car, happy as a clam that she was going home.

Our lives all have a lot of twists and turns, and we never know what is ahead. Sometimes the going gets tough and we don't know how things are going to turn out. Maybe that is why memories like this stay with us. So we can take them out every so often and remember that some stories do have happy endings. Sometimes things do turn out all right, and knowing that that is true can give us the courage and the will to keep on going, waiting for the next good memory to be made.

June 2004

Recently, I read an article about a border collie who can understand more than two hundred words. Researchers have found that he knows the names of his toys and can pick out certain ones when asked. While this is big news to the researchers, those of us who are dog owners are not surprised. When my children were young, it always seemed as though there were more than two of them in the house. One reason was that I usually ended up having any number of their cousins spending the night, but also because we always had several dogs sharing our home. There often didn't seem to be a lot of difference between the kids and the dogs, and I sometimes found myself talking to them the same way. Usually, the dogs listened better than the kids.

Even now, I find myself talking to Zeke (whom I call my four-footed son) like he's a two-year-old. "Where's your tug?" "Find your ball." "Is Dad home?" "Look at the puppy on TV!" (Yes, Zeke watches TV.) "Want to go for a ride?" Needless to say, he loves the word "go" and hates but reluctantly obeys the word "stay." "Let's get a treat," can sometimes entice him back into the house. He has learned to associate the sound of the loud boom-boom car speakers with the human son's arrival home. He knows the name of the cat, and one has to only say "Spider" for Zeke to go dashing madly after the unfortunate feline.

Any dog that has been obedience trained in any capacity understands a certain number of verbal commands, but even those who have not can learn through just day-to-day family living to recognize familiar words. So while I find the research interesting, I'm just not surprised. The researchers are just officially telling pet owners something they already know. That our pets are more perceptive and intelligent than they're often given credit for, and that they can enrich our lives in many different ways.

June 2006

Some stories about animals that have been in the news lately include the one about Lucky the pup. Some might not consider the little Jack Russell Terrier so lucky since someone threw her off a bridge. She ended up with several

broken legs and probably would have gone undiscovered and died if two boys out riding their bikes hadn't found her and called for help. First their family cared for Lucky and then Animal Aid entered the picture. Thanks to all of them getting involved, Lucky, whose real name is Matilda, is recuperating from her injuries.

Animal Aid doesn't usually become involved with animals that have owners, but since this little pup was considered a stray (she had actually been stolen and left for dead) when she was found, they have been taking care of her medical bills. Those expenses will be quite hefty, but that is why Animal Aid exists—to help those animals who are abandoned, abused or neglected. Of course, Lucky's story is only one of many. Animal Aid answers the call for animals that are shot, hit by cars, or in other desperate need of help, providing 24/7 rescue. Thank goodness for those people who are willing to get involved, and a big BIG thank you to the boys and their parents who chose not to walk away from a small puppy who needed help. The boys are to receive a Humane Action Award from the Wisconsin Puppy Mill Project, and that is certainly most deserved

A story than recently ran in the Lansing State Journal is about an equally insidious crime—that of dogfighting. It seems dogfighting, a crime in all 50 states and a felony in 48, is once again on the rise. It is carried on in back alleys, abandoned houses, and it is in Michigan. Professional bouts can bring in hundreds of thousands of dollars. No community is safe from this crime, and other illegal activities, such as drug use and gambling, are usually associated with the blood sport. It's not easy to read about dogfighting. The animals involved are condemned to a life of pain and vicious treatment, and even when they are rescued they often must be euthanized. It's nearly impossible to place a dog once used for fighting in a normal home. Nine out of ten people who seek to adopt a pit bull, the most common type of dog used for fighting, do not want it for a pet but ownership of the pit bull breed is on the rise, a sign that dogfighting is also. The Humane Society of the United States says about 40,000 people are involved in dogfights. It is a close-knit, underground ring that supports the crime and it is a difficult one to crack, but law enforcement agencies in many communities are working to infiltrate and eliminate the groups responsible. We need to give them our support.

On a lighter note, did you see the story about Jack, the 15-pound cat that chased a bear up a tree? Seems the New Jersey tabby did not take kindly to a black bear in his territory. At first Jack's owners thought their cat was just looking up at the treed bear in their yard, but then they realized the bear was afraid of the hissing cat. The bear descended, only to be chased up a second tree by Jack. The owner, fearing for Jack's safety, called him home and the bear finally hurried back to the woods. Guess we should all have a watch cat like that around.

Our own animal news is that Zeke turned four years old this week, and he celebrated by making a trip to Fuzzybutz Pet Bakery. It's hard to imagine a time when we did not have this bouncing ball of energy around!

All rights reserved. This publication, or parts thereof, may not be reproduced, displayed, modified or distributed without express prior written permission of the copyright holder.