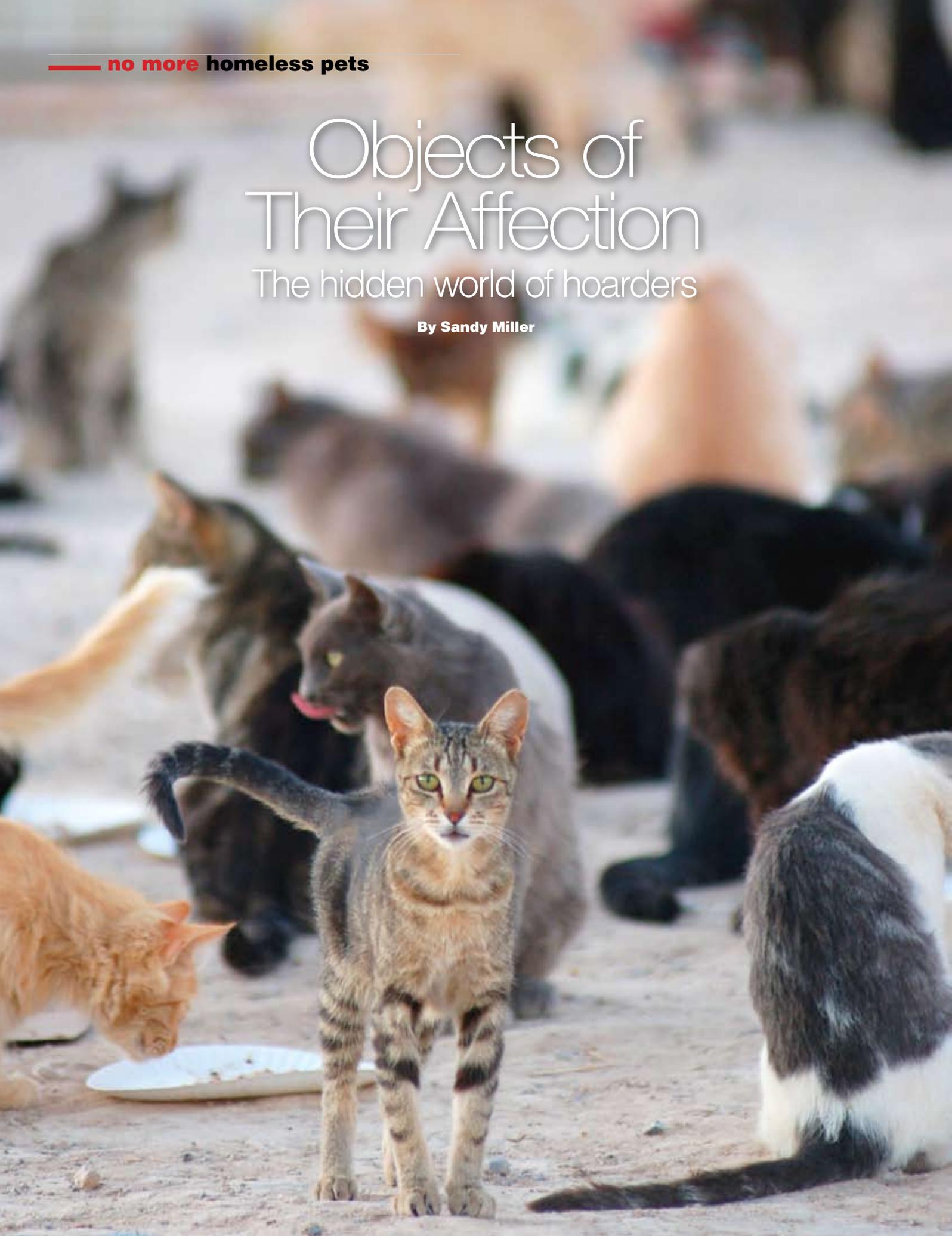


**no more homeless pets**

# Objects of Their Affection

The hidden world of hoarders

By Sandy Miller



## It was the first day of August and Russ Mead was driving through one of those blinding monsoon thunderstorms that always come with summer in the Nevada desert.

Mead, legal counsel for Best Friends Animal Society, was headed back to Pahrump, a small town 60 miles west of Las Vegas best known for its legal brothels, casinos and UFO sightings. There, a Best Friends rescue team was tending to around 700 cats that Nye County animal control had taken possession of. The cats belonged to a troubled nonprofit organization called FLOCK (For the Love of Cats and Kittens). Like most counties and municipalities, Nye County didn't have the money, the staff or the space to care for such a large group of felines, so they turned to Best Friends for help.

Best Friends rescue workers and volunteers had set up camp on the two-and-a-half-acre property in mid-July, and what they found there still haunts them. Hundreds and hundreds of cats were living in horrible conditions, with little shelter from the blistering three-digit temperatures. There were emaciated cats, wounded cats, sick cats with runny eyes and noses. One cat's eye was hanging out of its socket, and maggots had infested the wound.

Two weeks into the mission, things were beginning to look up. Best Friends staff and volunteers had cleaned up the property and were giving the cats the medical care, love and attention they so desperately needed. Sadly, some of them were just too far gone to be saved.

Mead knew there was much work left to be done. Many of the cats still needed rabies vaccinations, so he called the Nye County veterinarian. Could he make time in his busy schedule the next day to give some cats their rabies vaccinations? Mead asked. No, the veterinarian told him, he'd be too busy. "He said, 'I'm euthanizing 120 cats tomorrow,'" Mead remembers.

Mead immediately called one of the county deputies, but she didn't have time to talk. She was busy arresting Sheri Allen, the former president of FLOCK. When animal control officers had gone to Allen's house to interview her about the FLOCK situation, she opened her door and invited them right on in, they said. Did she think they wouldn't notice the more than 100 cats that they found in her house? Many of the cats appeared undernourished and were suffering from eye and respiratory infections and untreated wounds. Did she think they wouldn't see the feces on every surface, the shriveled bodies of two dead cats and the cat tail on the floor?

"How do you live with a cat tail in your house?" Mead said later. "She was in that much denial about the situation."

Welcome to the complicated world of what experts call animal hoarding.

### Denial and excuses

Allen (who declined to comment on the record for this article) was charged with 125 counts of animal cruelty. It was the animals found in her house that the county veterinarian was planning to euthanize. Like most counties, Nye County operates on a shoestring budget and simply doesn't have the resources to care for a large number of animals. Mead knew he had to do something, and he had to talk fast. He decided to make the deputy a deal.

"I will have people ready to take care of the cats if you promise

to keep them alive until we can talk about this," he told the deputy. The deputy agreed.

Best Friends sent a team over to the small county shelter to care for the cats, who were being held as evidence. Many of them were underweight and had upper respiratory infections, ringworm and other illnesses.

Had it not been for a FLOCK volunteer who blew the whistle, chances are no one would have known about the suffering cats at FLOCK and at Allen's home. It wasn't long before the blame game began. The FLOCK board blamed all the problems at the FLOCK property on Allen, who had been in the position a year when the board replaced her with new president Maggie Ward in late May 2007.

"We didn't know about [the conditions] for a long time because she wouldn't let volunteers into the facility," Ward told the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. "She kept it locked and changed the locks every couple of weeks."

The case is now in the hands of the Nye County District Attorney's Office, which will decide whether or not to file charges against Allen, Ward and members of the FLOCK board.

## Overwhelmed caregiver hoarders have strong attachments to their animals and they understand there's a problem.

### Institutional hoarders: collective denial

Collective denial – of individuals, of the whole group – may have contributed to the cats' suffering. "It's becoming a common thing," says Dr. Gary Patronek, a veterinarian, epidemiologist and director of animal welfare and protection for the Animal Rescue League of Boston, and the founder of the Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (HARC). "We really don't understand how groups of people, as opposed to individuals acting alone, could ignore suffering and death in a shelter or rescue environment. At least three different types of hoarders have been identified: overwhelmed caregiver, rescue hoarder and exploiter hoarder. It is the latter that is the least likely to have good intentions."

There's a big difference between a legitimate shelter or sanctuary and a hoarder who operates under the guise of being a no-kill organization. Legitimate sanctuaries don't take in more animals than they can properly care for. They isolate the animals when they first come in so they can be screened for communicable diseases before placing them with healthy animals. They give them the medical care they need and they work hard to place them in good new homes. Their grounds are clean and they have adequate staff to care for the animals.

And they don't operate in secrecy. "Institutional hoarders aren't open," Mead says. "They hide their animals."

Allen thought of herself as a rescuer, taking in cats no one else wanted. "Rescue hoarders" believe they're the only ones who can adequately care for their animals and they're in complete denial about the terrible conditions they're living in.

Patronek says hoarders who call themselves rescuers "should be an offense to every legitimate rescuer. It's all about the person's underlying need to acquire and control these animals. The needs of the animals don't come first."

### Kindly cat ladies and sociopaths

There are several different categories of hoarders, but according to HARC, all hoarders have the following things in common:

- They have more than the typical number of companion animals.
- They are unable to provide even minimal standards of nutrition, sanitation, shelter and veterinary care – and the neglect often results in starvation, illness and death.
- They deny their inability to provide this minimum care and they deny the impact of that failure on the animals, the household and the human occupants of the dwelling.

Although there can be similarities, each and every hoarding case is different. In addition to rescue and exploiter hoarders, there's the overwhelmed caregiver hoarder, typically characterized as the kindly cat lady down the street who just can't say no to a stray in need and suddenly finds herself with more animals than she can adequately care for. According to HARC, overwhelmed caregiver hoarders have strong attachments to their animals and they understand there's a problem. They may be socially isolated and often believe their situation was caused by some change in their circumstances. They have fewer issues with authority figures and are often quite willing to have someone intervene.

But not all hoarders have good intentions. For exploiter hoarders, it's all about them, not the well-being of the animals. These people acquire animals to serve their own needs and are indifferent to the harm they're causing them. They deny that a problem exists and reject any kind of help. They're master manipulators with an extreme need to control, and they often come across as charming and articulate. They actively acquire animals and will lie, cheat and steal without remorse to achieve their goals.

Patronek says the exploiter hoarder is actually a sociopath, someone "who is incapable of empathy toward animals or humans."

### Shop 'til you drop

Take the case a few years back of a Minnesota man whose animal hoarding helped feed his shopping compulsion. The charming,

wealthy, 40ish divorcé lived in a beautiful home in an exclusive neighborhood. He enjoyed frequenting one of the local pet stores, where he spent thousands of dollars on parrots, ferrets, reptiles, hamsters and other small pets. One day, he told one of the pet store clerks that some of his animals had died and he was looking to buy some more. After he left, the alarmed clerk alerted humane investigators.

When they went to his home, he could hardly open the front door because of the large pile of mail that had accumulated inside. A neighbor observed the man's children burying dead animals on the property. Authorities took almost 80 animals from his property, including some very expensive parrots. As in Allen's case, the inside of the spacious home was covered in feces and there were dead animals and animal parts in the sink garbage disposal. Two sugar gliders were found dead in the pricey carriers they'd been shipped in, and a standard poodle was living in his car.

Volunteers with Midwest Avian Adoption and Rescue Services (MAARS) came to the scene to pick up the parrots and take them back to MAARS' shelter and sanctuary in St. Louis Park.

The man didn't show any remorse, says Eileen McCarthy, founder and chief executive officer of the organization. "He stood on the lawn yelling at me. He wanted to know if I knew how to care for his rainbow lorikeet."

Inside the man's home, authorities found even more evidence of the man's shopping compulsion, including hundreds of unopened CDs, electronics and bag after bag of expensive clothing

with the tags still on them. "This wasn't about his love for animals," McCarthy says. "It was about his need to be a conspicuous consumer of things."

McCarthy says birds are particularly easy prey for hoarders because they can be hidden away in basements and dark rooms. "If someone has 100 dogs, or even 20 dogs, you're going to hear barking and you're going to know something is going on," McCarthy says. "Unfortunately for birds, when it's dark outside, they're quiet. People won't file complaints."

### Too many hoarders, too few resources

Seven years ago, McCarthy helped rescue 61 parrots from one of Minnesota's largest breeders. The breeder lived in Oronoco, Minnesota, a small rural town an hour and a half south of the Twin Cities. At one time, the woman had more than 300 birds on her property. "She was a breeder and a hoarder," McCarthy says.

McCarthy and two other people, including an avian veterinarian, went to the woman's property posing as potential buyers. "It was very dark," McCarthy says. "The lights were off and the stench

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was almost unbearable.”

After they left the breeder’s home, they stopped at a diner. “We wrote up everything we’d seen and went straight to the sheriff’s department. They took our statement.”

McCarthy told the sheriff’s department that her organization was willing to take the birds. “They were just thrilled to know we existed and that we were able to help. They had been investigating her, but didn’t know what to do.”

And that’s true of many counties and municipalities, as well as animal control officers, judges and district attorneys. Often, they know little about hoarding or about the laws that protect animals in hoarding situations. Prosecuting these cases can be time-consuming and expensive. There are the costs of removing the animals, boarding them and trying the case.

“Prosecutors don’t want to take on these cases because the laws have no teeth in them,” McCarthy says.

### **Prosecuting the hoarder**

In most states, a prosecutor must be the one to decide to bring charges against animal hoarders for committing acts of cruelty to animals. But the Animal Legal Defense Fund (ALDF), with help from the San Francisco-based Schiff Hardin LLP law firm, found another way to take Barbara and Robert Woodley of Sanford, North Carolina, to court.

Bruce Wagman, chief litigator for ALDF and an animal protection attorney with Schiff Hardin, called it one of the worst cases of animal cruelty he’s ever seen. “There were 400 dogs living in their own filth,” Wagman says. “They were covered in feces and lying in their own urine.” Veterinarians testified that hundreds of the dogs were blind or nearly blind and some had broken bones that had never been treated.

The ALDF used a unique North Carolina statute that allows any private citizen or organization to bring civil charges against animal abusers for violating cruelty laws. In a landmark decision last February, the North Carolina Court of Appeals ruled in favor of the ALDF. It was the first time a court had confirmed the right of a nonresident animal protection organization to use the North Carolina law. The ALDF was awarded custody of the dogs, who are now safely tucked away in foster homes. In late October, the state supreme court rejected the Woodleys’ efforts at appeal.

Wagman says the ALDF wanted the criminal case prosecuted

as a felony, but the prosecutor wanted to go with a misdemeanor because it would be easier to get a conviction.

Based on the North Carolina provision, the ALDF has drafted the Model Law for a Private Right of Action, which, if passed in other states, will reduce the burden on local prosecutors and allow concerned citizens and animal protection groups to stop hoarding in their own communities.



Statutes regarding the care of animals are often vague and need to be better defined.

### **Toughening up hoarding laws**

Though 43 states now have felony animal-cruelty statutes on their books, it’s difficult to get convictions under those statutes in hoarding cases. That’s because hoarding is often considered animal neglect, not a deliberate act of cruelty. And only a few states consider animal neglect a felony.

“Only a handful of states allow felony charges for the worst kinds of animal neglect,” says Stephan Otto, director of legislative affairs for ALDF. “They also need stronger laws that take into account when multiple numbers of animals are involved in a case.”

Otto says statutes regarding the care of animals are often vague and need to be better defined. For instance, a statute might say you must provide adequate shelter for your animals, but it doesn’t clearly define what adequate shelter means. “They need to be clearer about the basics,” Otto says.

In 2001, Illinois became the first state to add a definition of a companion animal hoarder to its cruelty statutes. It not only makes hoarding cases easier to prosecute, but allows for increased penalties and allows courts to order the convicted hoarder to undergo mental health treatment for his or her hoarding behavior. State legislators in New Mexico, Vermont and Montana have also proposed laws that specifically

address animal hoarding. And a few counties and municipalities have added hoarding ordinances to their books.

Otto would like to see more states follow Illinois’ lead and add hoarding definitions to their statutes that include enhanced penalties and mental health treatment and ban a hoarder from having animals for a certain length of time. He says most of the lawmakers he’s spoken to have been receptive.

“Hoarding is a huge drain, both financially and emotionally, on a community,” Otto says. “If you can reduce hoarding, you can save the limited resources of a community and that’s always of interest to politicians.”

Laura Allen, who works in the legal department at Best Friends,

has drafted a hoarding ordinance that she and Mead hope Nye County and other communities will adopt. The ordinance recognizes hoarding as a separate crime from cruelty to animals. “The biggest difference is intent,” says Mead. “Hoarders don’t intend to hurt the animals, but in fact do so in a greater number than a person convicted of a single act of animal cruelty.”

The ordinance would make it easier for prosecutors to win cases and for judges to make sometimes-difficult decisions. In August, a judge awarded custody of the animals found in Sheri Allen’s home to Nye County, but the judge admitted it was a hard decision for her to make. “The judge ruled that taking Allen’s cats away was the most difficult decision she’d made in 24 years on the bench,” Mead says. “She felt Allen didn’t have malice in her heart.”

Best Friends’ ordinance recognizes that most hoarders don’t have malice in their hearts. It also allows a judge to order the hoarder to undergo mental health treatment and to ban the hoarder from having animals for a certain length of time – up to a lifetime. And convicted hoarders would be subject to unannounced inspections by animal control officers to make sure they haven’t started collecting more animals. Research has shown that simply taking away a hoarder’s animals isn’t enough. Without mental health treatment and monitoring, there’s a 100-percent recidivism rate, according to HARC.

Nye County animal control supervisor Tim McCarty is optimistic that county commissioners will adopt Best Friends’ hoarding ordinance. Nye County is also now in the process of toughening up its animal control laws to include licenses and inspections so that situations like Allen’s and FLOCK’s don’t happen again.

### **A multidisciplinary approach**

Patronek remembers well the first hoarding case he ever encountered. It was almost 20 years ago and he was the director of the Chester County SPCA in West Chester, Pennsylvania. Back then, shelters and humane societies such as his were left to deal with hoarding cases on their own. They had received a report about two women who were living in a tent outside a house off a busy highway. Both were mentally impaired and were eating out of the garbage bin of the Pizza Hut next door.

“The house was uninhabitable and filled with mountains of garbage and about 70 cats in cages,” Patronek says. “A dozen or so dogs

ran freely. All the dogs had mange and many of the cats were ill. Wire cages contained multiple empty food and water bowls. There was no running water in the house and no electricity.”

The Chester County SPCA persuaded a social services caseworker to take a look inside the home, and she wrote the women up for a 72-hour involuntary commitment. The Chester County SPCA never heard anything more about the women and the cats were essentially abandoned to the SPCA. Most of them were so ill they had to be euthanized.

“It was a very sad situation,” Patronek says. “There was indifference on the part of mental health and all the other community stakeholders who could play a role. There was no recognition of the human health hazards present.”

Today, almost 20 years later, some communities, including New York City and Dane County, Wisconsin, have established hoarding task forces in which animal protection organizations, social services, public health departments, child protective services, offices on aging and code enforcement agencies all work together on hoarding cases. In many other places, though, you need to fight to get anyone to pay attention.

“These situations are still not widely accepted as a community-wide problem, and shelters are often left to clean up the mess,” Patronek says. “There’s a community-wide responsibility to help, yet this does not frequently occur, particularly when there is law enforcement and animals must be kept as evidence for extended periods. The costs of housing and rehabilitation are often beyond the means of most animal welfare organizations. These are man-made disasters and need a similar level of coordination of response from multiple agencies and officials.”

### **Treating the hoarder**

Animal hoarders, who often live in isolated, solitary conditions, are generally distrustful of other people. Such distrust of outsiders can make Jane Nathanson’s job very difficult.

Nathanson, a Boston-based therapist, has been working with animal hoarders for eight years. There’s one thing she and other experts all agree on: Unless you treat the underlying mental health issues, there’s a 100-percent recidivism rate. “You can remove the animals, but it doesn’t remove the hoarder’s need to continuously acquire and possess animals,” Nathanson says.

There are a lot of misconceptions out there about animal hoard-



Hoarders often believe that they, and only they, can save the lives of these animals.

ers. For instance, not all hoarders suffer from obsessive-compulsive disorder, though some of them certainly do. They may be suffering from a variety of other mental health disorders, including borderline personality disorder, anxiety, social phobia, schizoaffective disorder and elderly dementia.

Although studies have shown that animal hoarders also collect inanimate objects, Nathanson points out that "there's a distinct difference between the collection of objects and the collection of animals, who are sentient beings and with whom one has a dynamic relationship."

Nathanson says many of the hoarders she's treated suffer from attachment disorders stemming from a dysfunctional relationship with an abusive, inconsistent or absent parent. Such conditions, especially when combined with subsequent trauma in an individual's life, can set the stage for animal hoarding behavior.

"Without having developed satisfactory relationships with primary caregivers, due to inconsistent or absent parenting, or physical, emotional or sexual abuse, you have a foundation that undermines future ongoing relationships," Nathanson explains. "Consequently, with this psychosocial history, functional relationships with animals may become dysfunctional."

Hoarders often believe that they, and only they, can save the lives of these animals. And their self-esteem is very much tied into their hoarding behavior.

"If you asked them why they're doing this, they'd say, 'Without me, these animals will die,'" Nathanson says. "There's also a self-esteem need that's being met. They have an insatiable need for these relationships. There's a tremendous sense of power and sense of control within this domain that the animal hoarder has created. The hoarder is often engaging in a futile effort to fulfill unmet needs, but it's like trying to satiate thirst by filling up on food. They're trying to develop relationships with animals that give them the semblance of mutual nurturance, which they may not have derived in their significant human relationships."

Nathanson often refers her clients to other professionals who specialize in treating their particular type of mental health disorder, while she focuses her work on the issues of human/animal health and welfare. She begins by taking a medical and psychosocial history on her patients, along with an assessment of their current status with personal, family and work issues.

Then she does a reality check with them, trying to get them to see that it's against the animals' nature to be living in the crowded, unsanitary environment that's been created for them.

"Animals are essentially clean," Nathanson says. "They don't want to be living in their own urine and feces." She strives to educate the hoarders about how the unmanageable number of animals results in neglect of their essential need for clean food and water, grooming, socialization, preventive care and treatment of disease or injury.

Nathanson says working with hoarders is an uphill battle. "Hoarders can be so insistent that they're providing homes to unwanted homeless animals and that they're saving their lives," she says. "You're challenging the very identity whereby they've achieved their self-esteem, a sense of control within this domain they've created."

Making Nathanson's work even more difficult is the fact that most insurance companies don't cover treatment of animal hoarding, which is not yet a diagnostic entity in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV). The people who come to her usually have the financial resources to pay for their own treatment or have families willing to pay for treatment.

## Sanctuary Workshops

### How to Start an Animal Sanctuary

2008:

March 16 – 22 • June 8 – 14

August 10 – 16 • November 2 – 8

An intensive, week-long workshop for people interested in forming their own organization to help the animals. Includes starting a nonprofit, fundraising and animal care programs. Attendance is limited.

Cost: \$650, includes lunches, two dinners and extensive materials.

### Dog Behavior & Handling Workshop

2008:

April 7 – 11 • September 15 – 19

This in-depth workshop gives you the tools you need to relate to dogs in a shelter, sanctuary, and/or a rescue setting. Learn about dog behaviors, safety, assessments, creating behavior plans and more. Attendance is limited.

Cost: \$400, includes four lunches and materials.

### Giving Heart Retreat: A Workshop to Replenish the Animal Lover's Soul

May 16 – 18, 2008

Animal lovers face many unique challenges of the heart. Dr. Linda Harper, a clinical psychologist specializing in pet loss, burnout and letting go, will lead a workshop designed to rejuvenate your giving spirit.

Cost: \$300, includes lunches, one dinner and materials.

### Long-Term Animal Care

October 8 – 11, 2008

An advanced, four-day workshop on how to enrich the quality of life for animals in your care. Attendees should be actively involved with an established humane group and/or graduates of our How to Start an Animal Sanctuary workshop.

Cost: \$375, includes lunches, one dinner and materials.

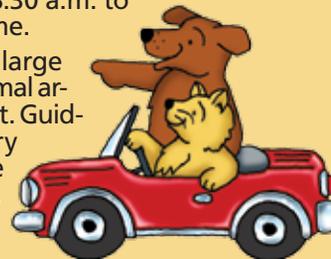
For more information, visit our Workshop Community at [network.bestfriends.org/workshops](http://network.bestfriends.org/workshops)

(435) 644-3965 ext. 4317 • [humane.ed@bestfriends.org](mailto:humane.ed@bestfriends.org)

## Visiting Best Friends

The Best Friends Welcome Center is open every day except Christmas from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Mountain Time.

The sanctuary covers a large area and some of the animal areas are several miles apart. Guided tours of the sanctuary leave from the Welcome Center four times daily. They need to be booked ahead of time.



To book a tour, or for more information about visiting the sanctuary, e-mail [visiting@bestfriends.org](mailto:visiting@bestfriends.org) or call (435) 644-2001, ext. 0. Your furry friends look forward to seeing you soon!



## The Overwhelmed Caregiver

When helping gets out of hand

“Ron” sat in the “cat room” of his sister’s Las Vegas home and tried to make some sense of the scene around him.

He’d always known his sister had a lot of cats; he just didn’t know how many.

That day, there were 24 cats in his sister’s home, some friendly and clamoring for his attention, others unsocialized and skittish. A few of the cats peered out from inside some old, worn couches.

The cats had plenty of food and fresh water, but they were living in filth. Their cat boxes were overflowing, and the ammonia from their urine was so intense that Ron worried it might have damaged the cats’ eyes.

He knew he had to do something. He put on a mask, rolled up his sleeves, and scrubbed down the cat room and cleaned the cat boxes. Before returning home to Redondo Beach, California, he made sure his sister had plenty of cat food, litter, medications and cleaning supplies.

But when he got home, he couldn’t get the cats’ haunted eyes out of his mind.

A short time later, he was reading the May 2006 issue of *Best Friends* magazine when he came across a story on how Best Friends had come to the rescue of 1,600 rabbits living in the backyard of a mobile home in Reno, Nevada. Accompanying the story was a sidebar about animal hoarding, including descriptions of different kinds of hoarders. Ron immediately recognized his sister in the description of the “overwhelmed caregiver.”

The overwhelmed caregiver hoarder is often aware that things have gotten out of hand, perhaps aggravated by an illness or the death of a spouse who was helping. While these hoarders are often strongly attached to the animals, they don’t object to people coming in to help. They often acquire the animals passively, like the neighborhood cat lady who finds kittens dropped off at her home.

“It totally rang a bell,” Ron says.

Ron showed the article to his sister. Tears welled up in her eyes. In that one little paragraph, “Sarah” saw herself.

### It all started with kindness

Ten years ago, Sarah had just two cats. Then her now-ex-husband brought home a litter of four kittens he’d found in a field behind his workplace on Las Vegas’ busy Boulder Highway.

Not long after, he brought home another abandoned litter of kittens. And then Sarah herself found a litter of kittens and their mother. Each time, she took the kittens under her wing, hand-feeding them with tiny baby bottles until they were able to eat on their own.

She turned to local rescue organizations for help with vaccinations and spay/neuter. She had no intention of keeping the cats. She made phone call after phone call to humane groups and tacked up flyers everywhere. She managed to place two of the kittens with a rescue group. Two other kittens died of feline leukemia.

For a while, Sarah was able to keep up with her growing cat population. Then she hit a string of bad luck: a divorce, an illness and a trio of car accidents, the last one leaving her nearly immobile with a fractured back. She couldn’t keep up with caring for the cats, who were starting to fight with each other, leaving some of them timid and seemingly feral.

That’s when Ron intervened. And Sarah was happy to let him do just that. “He’s the most wonderful person in the world,” Sarah says of her brother. “He took charge.”

## A mission of the heart

Ron made it his mission to find homes for his sister's cats. He made a spreadsheet listing every rescue organization within a 300-mile radius of Las Vegas and began contacting them one by one. He created a website with the cats' photos and a description of each one, along with his contact information.

"I kept saying to myself, 'You have to do what's in front of your face when it's in front of your face,'" Ron says. "I couldn't look in their eyes and not do something." Even though it was a depressing situation, Ron tried to maintain a sense of humor about it all. It kept him sane.

"It seems to me that most people working with or for rescues and shelters have to deal with enough heartbreak," says Ron, who describes himself as an animal lover first and a graphic artist second. "A little laughter is the best medicine."

In his effort to find homes, one of the calls Ron made was to Liz Finch, an animal help specialist at Best Friends. Finch immediately contacted everyone in Best Friends' West Coast database.

Finch says Best Friends receives 30 to 50 hoarding-related calls a month. Some are from concerned relatives like Ron, and others are from hoarders themselves. Those calls must be treated with the utmost care if there's any hope of helping the animals involved.

"You have to rein in your personal judgment," Finch says. "You have to say, 'I understand your situation and how you got to this point.' Quite often, they're in a panic state. You have to talk them down. You have to say, 'This isn't a horrible thing. You're not a horrible person, but it's going to take a while to find safe places for these animals.'"

The important thing, she notes, is to not chase the caller away.

"I have a finite amount of time that I'm their best friend," she says. "The next thing I know, I'm their enemy."

Soon, Ron started receiving calls from individuals and organizations offering to help. He himself adopted one of the cats, and he found homes for six others. He placed five cats with rescue groups in southern Utah, something he jokingly refers to as "the Utah trifecta." Buttons, Patches and Punkin Puss are at Furever Friends in Cedar City, Tablets is at PAWS in St. George, and Squeaky is at Best Friends.

Ron drove 1,100 miles in 2 1/2 days to deliver the cats to their new homes and safe havens.

Sarah has since moved to a new home with her remaining 12 cats. She plans to keep the older cats, who are 10, 11 and 12 years old, and continues to look for new homes for the others. And unlike most other hoarders, she has made no attempt to take in more animals. She still puts food outside for the occasional stray, but that's as close as they'll get to her front door.

"I have to say no and that's it," she says.

Ron says his quest to find homes for the cats was a mission of the heart.

"I was originally saddened and burdened that this situation with my sister's cats compelled me to take this journey," Ron says. "Now, I realize it was a journey that had to be taken."

Ron has some advice for other relatives and friends of overwhelmed caregivers: "Be more aware. Don't be judgmental, but don't ignore it."

## A victory for the cats

It was August 29, the second day of testimony in a motion hearing about the animals found living in Sheri Allen's home.

Patty Hegwood, animal care director for Best Friends, took the stand and presented photographs that documented the terrible conditions the cats were living in when Nye County animal control officers walked into Allen's home. The photos showed starving cats with serious eye infections, upper respiratory infections and untreated wounds.



"I was ecstatic that kindness had won out over neglect."

Deputy Dawn Moore, the person who had arrested Allen, testified to the gruesome scene in Allen's house.

In turn, Allen provided a video in an attempt to show that the conditions weren't that bad. She had even found a veterinarian to tell the court that the cats weren't in chronic pain. However, the county veterinarian disagreed, testifying that the cats were in bad shape and were indeed in pain.

The judge ruled that the animals in the photos had to have been suffering and transferred ownership of them over to Nye County, which turned them over to Best Friends.

After the hearing, Mead went over to the county shelter and officially adopted 114 cats, three dachshunds, two ferrets, two desert lizards and two dogs. The next day, the animals were loaded onto a climate-controlled truck and brought to Best Friends, where they're now safe and sound and will never again be deprived of food, medical care or love.

"I was relieved to know the cats would live clean and healthy lives," Mead says. "I was ecstatic that kindness had won out over neglect." 🐾