

Volunteering at Best Friends Animal Sanctuary

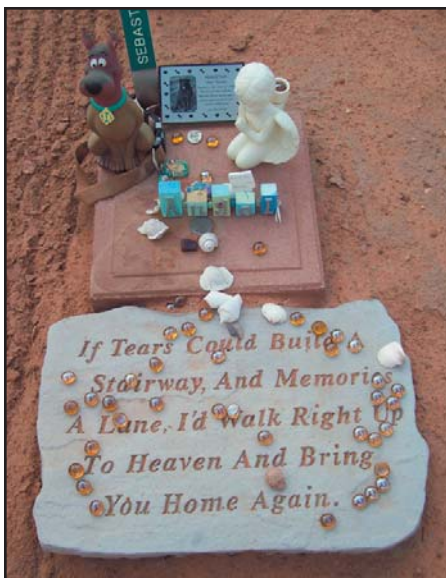
Kanab, Utah • October 10-17, 2009

Day 1 – Saturday The 18½-hour journey

Glen Spey, NY to Kanab, UT: 2 hours to Newark, NJ; 5-hour flight to Las Vegas, NV; 4-hour drive to Kanab, UT.

Day 2 – Sunday The adventure begins

Along with several others, I had a 9:30 a.m. appointment with a volunteer coordinator and we went through the motion of paperwork and do's and don'ts. I found the *very* dangerous gift shop to which I returned many times. At 10:30 a.m. I took a 90-minute tour of the 3,800+ acre sanctuary where 12 of us piled into a van and were driven through the grounds with breathtaking views of Angel Canyon. We travelled past a horse arena that was donated in memory of Riley, a long-time former resident whose leg had to be amputated, and a small barn that was built by Disney for a movie which now houses horses Alex and Yasmine. We followed Kanab Creek which is a tributary of the Colorado River and observed the rock where the famous Lone Ranger pose was



A grave at Angel's Rest.



Sign at entrance to Best Friends.

filmed ("Hi, Ho Silver, Away!"). We passed Angel's Rest, a pet cemetery for not only the sanctuary animals who passed over the rainbow bridge but others from around the country as well. Past Ambush Pass, where several westerns were filmed, we came upon the Grand Staircase Escalante and eventually past Dog Town, which is referred to as a "gated community" due to the gates created by a local artist at either end. The first stop was the cat area, where approximately 800 cats live in cateries with different



Casa DelMar resident

names, i.e. the Incontinental Suite. We unloaded ourselves and visited the FIV house, which houses residents with Feline Immune Virus (kitty AIDS). We were instructed to disinfect our hands before touching any cats, not for our own protection, but so we didn't carry bacteria into other areas. At the door to each of the three separate rooms there is a basin with disinfectant for shoes. What luxury these critters have! An indoor room loaded with beds, toys and goodies with several cat doors that lead to an outside enclosure where more beds, toys and climbing apparatus are found. They may be less than perfect, but I think my own cats would be envious! The next stop was Dog Town, where some 650 dogs live and met some of the smaller residents who either showed off or simply barked saying "look at me, look at me!!"

After the tour I drove into town and stocked up on dog and cat treats and rushed back to check in



Scratch

for my afternoon volunteer stint at Dog Town. I was sent to Amra which is home to behavioral issue dogs. My first assignment was Scratch, a Pit Bull who absolutely loves attention, whom I happily brushed for 1.5 hours. Next was Beans (he can sneeze on command!) who wore me out playing Frisbee relentlessly. He doesn't like human hands on him, but he tolerated a few scratches and hugs here and there. I choked up several times thinking about the former plight of these wonderful guys.

At 4:00 p.m., I returned to Dog Town headquarters to register for a sleepover dog. Volunteers are assigned dogs with their preferences in mind (i.e. large vs. small; energetic vs. sedate; etc.) with strict instructions not to leave the animal unattended with an evaluation form to fill out of how the dog behaved. This helps the sanctuary with rehabilitation or placement. I received Reuben, an older, slightly overweight Pit Bull/Setter mix who was driven to headquarters in a golf cart. He happily jumped into my Jeep and we went for a short drive around the sanctuary before settling down for some cuddle time back at the cabin. He was very good except refusing to get off the bed to go outside for a walk. Hmm... I wondered how I was going to return him, since he's a big boy and wouldn't easily be hoisted into a Jeep! We enjoyed a very lazy evening together, watching TV and sleeping.



Beans

Day 3 - Monday Dog Town - The Garden

In the morning, Reuben wanted nothing to do with the great outdoors. He was on the bed and refused to get off until an hour later where I gently coaxed him off to do his business. I dropped him off at headquarters where they took him back to his run and signed in for a morning assignment at The Garden run by caregiver Lupie. It was dog-walking duty. I was teamed up with River, a 4-year-old, energetic, chocolate Lab who was given up by his owners because they couldn't afford his heartworm treatments. Since I didn't know the trails, Lupe had me walk with Marc from Baltimore who was teamed with Hopie, a *very* shy Hurricane Katrina victim. River and I took 2 turns around the loop while Hopie and Marc only did one because



Anahi



Reuben

she stubbornly refused to go any farther. Next I was given Anahi, a gorgeous 12-year-old Akita given up for unknown reasons who was rescued before she was scheduled to be euthanized. She has since earned her Good Citizenship Award with a perfect 10! We gently walked the loop, myself having appreciated the slower pace. I fell in love with this gentle giant and brushed Anahi for an hour. Next Lupe, I and another volunteer fed the dogs. Each dog has his/her own diet and eating habits, for example one was fed in a muffin tin because he would otherwise inhale his food too quickly. I fed one dog by hand, again because she would otherwise eat too quickly.

After feeding, we were assigned poop scooping, watering and sweeping. I happily poop scooped several outdoor runs, getting to meet several other dogs. One was Dandy, a beautiful Shepherd/Collie mix (they say with eyeliner), but painfully shy, who followed me around her run making sure



Hopie and Marc



View from outdoor dining area

I did my job correctly. I also met Karina, the famous Dog Town personality who was taught to turn on light switches. She is a hyper gal, yet happily barking and playing with her toys.

From 12:00 noon to 1:00 p.m. the sanctuary shuts down for lunch. I drove to Angel Village (the sanctuary cafeteria) where they serve a vegetarian lunch Monday through Saturday. The view overlooking the canyon from the outdoor deck was magnificent.

While checking in at headquarters, I saw Dr. Mike ("Dog Town") who was mobbed by several females for photos. I went back to The Garden and spent a half hour brushing Dandy until she had enough of me and then took Anahi for an outing to town. We stopped at a thrift store because I was in dire need of shoes that kept the desert sand out. She was a hit with everyone in the store (I was so proud!). We walked through town a bit and came back to the cabin for a rest. We headed back into town for dinner at Spurs which had an outdoor seating area. They brought out a water dish and, because she's so

pretty, Anahi got spoiled with loving and a treat. She was on her best behavior; I couldn't imagine *anyone* giving up this dog for any reason. Too large and too old to get up on the bed, she happily slept in the corner on several blankets until morning. Needless to say, she passed her evaluation with me with flying colors!

Day 4 - Tuesday Kittyville - Mondrian and Vinnie's

After a tearful good-bye to Anahi (who, by the way, will be going to a foster home in two weeks), I registered at Cat Headquarters for the day. Vivian, one of the founders, gave us volunteers our assignments and I was sent to Mondrian House with an assortment of cats including ferals. Charlene, the caregiver, and I *solely* cleaned two rooms, and *boy* was it *work*! Dog Town was a piece of cake compared to this! We had to brush *all* the beds/blankets, wipe down *all* surfaces, clean the windows and litter boxes, move the beds/cat houses/climbing apparatus, sweep, mop and squeegee the floors and put everything back the same way it was. Then we had to do it *all over again* in the other room! I asked Charlene if she did this every day and she replied 'yes'! (These people are SAINTS!) Frodo, a long-haired grey cat, was the friendliest of both rooms and repeatedly wanted attention, which I gladly gave. Others were shy/skittish, although I was able to pet several of them, much to Charlene's surprise.



Outdoor cat enclosure at Vinnie's House

The afternoon was spent in Vinnie's House with fill-in caregiver Denise. This catery is a mix of ferals and a bit more socialized cats. Again, the same routine, clean, clean and clean again, except these guys were quite a bit cleaner. It was still sweat-producing work! Afterwards another volunteer and I socialized with the cats with many of them jumping in our laps for attention. I was drawn to Licorice, a long-haired one-eyed handsome boy in the first room. He had an infection in his eye that wouldn't heal and the eye had to be removed. In the other room, there was JuJu, who was *supposedly* a biter, her identity only revealed to me *after* I cuddled, picked her up, fed her treats and petted her for quite a while! (I think they're *lying*!) I also had a soft spot for a Persian who has a nervous tick and walks a bit funny. I wanted to take JuJu for a sleepover, but they wouldn't agree on short notice, because I forgot to register by 4:00 p.m. So I "settled" for Licorice (his first sleepover), who, as it turned out, has the most adorable little mewl that is so endearing! Although he didn't care for the car ride (what cat does?), he loved every moment of being petted and brushed and being the one-and-only, even if just for a night.



Licorice

Day 5 - Wednesday Dog Town - The Garden and Old Friends

Licorice happily settled back at Vinnie's and I met Sandra, the regular caretaker who was thrilled that I wanted to take JuJu for a sleepover. We agreed that she was misunderstood.



Valley Girl

My morning was spent at The Garden walking the dogs. First was Valley Girl, a beautiful Akita mix who stopped and sniffed every two minutes and peed with her hind legs off the ground! Occasionally she would furiously paw sand over her pee, much to the dismay of anyone following too closely (that'll teach them!). We did two laps of the trail because she had more lizards to look for (though she never saw any). Goober, an enthusiastic Pit Bull who just had several teeth pulled, was next and after Goober I was able to take a turn with my old friend Anahi and brushed her a while afterwards. When all the dogs were walked, we fed, swept and mopped.

After lunch (against my better judgment) I signed up at Old Friends. Caretaker Joyce met me at the entrance and almost immediately I was a weepy mess! She assigned me to Bubbles (or vice versa) for an outing. Bubbles, aka Bubble-icious, is a 9-year-old Lab mix, *very* sweet and energetic. Joyce said if she gave me an older dog with a bad leg or something I'd probably get too emotional (who... *me?!?*).



Bubbles, aka Bubble-icious

Bubbles and I spent a couple hours walking through town and lounging on the bed in the cabin. She is a sweetheart!

At 4:00 p.m. I picked up Dandy from The Garden for a sleepover. Super shy, super fearful, yet super beautiful, we took a walk through Angel's Rest and she was very wary of strangers at the other end. We spent a little down time at the cabin before going to town for dinner. It seemed very traumatic for her; she didn't like the guests coming and going or the wait staff getting so close to the table. I felt so bad as if I was torturing her! We hurried out of there, took a walk near the cabin and spent the rest of the evening lazing on the bed together. Dandy hardly moved a muscle; I think she was counting every minute until she was back in her run.



Dandy

Day 6 – Thursday Kittyville – Mondrian and Kitty Motel

Dandy and I took a small walk this morning; *she* really took *me* because she would shut down when I wanted to return to the cabin (it was *cold!*) so I gave in and went farther. She was probably thinking how much longer this torture was going to last. She has an application for adoption in process; I do hope she finds a loving forever home. She did wag her tail for a few seconds with a happy smile on her face until she remembered she was supposed to be fearful. I took her back to The Garden and Lupie gave me a big hug and said I was a wonderful volunteer (she probably says that to everyone). She assured me I did a wonderful thing by taking Dandy out.

I was assigned to Mondrian House (cats) for the morning session and Charlene and I cleaned both rooms again single-handedly as before. This time I noticed Charlie and Chaplain (they are here because their owner died); both beautiful black-and-white cats, friendly and full of purr. Another black kitty, Pat, kept hiding behind Chaplain to be pet until she saw my hand and took off. During break I spoke with Vivian about the hiring process at Best Friends. They have a two-week training period where both parties have a chance to decide whether the hire will be beneficial at the end of which the employee goes back home, settles their affairs and returns to find housing. Hmm... the wheels are spinning...

Each Thursday at Angel Village they have announcements of each section's progress/news. Afterward, I had enough time to explore and found the horse and pot-bellied pig section. Two beautiful Clydesdales were there after having been retired after 15 years of pulling a cart; one of which has



Pot-bellied pigs

an infection in his hooves and has them bandaged to his knees. The pot-bellied pigs were adorable (I had never seen one in person) and flopped onto their sides for belly rubs. One made the cutest little grunting noises almost like whining! Pet me, pet me!!!

My afternoon assignment was in Kitty Motel, a special-needs house. As soon as I walked in, I was met by Pokey whose back legs were paralyzed and he dragged himself across the floor with his forelegs! The official greeter, Pokey made sure everyone was welcomed in style! Caretaker Tammy gave me instructions to love the cats in each room. That's it! No cleaning (halleluiah!!) There were five rooms, one of which was quarantined. All the cats here are FIV positive



Clydesdales

and one room had ringworm so extra precautions were needed when entering/leaving each room (disinfecting hands/shoes and a special spray that temporarily—I hope—turns your clothes pink). I tried to spend a half hour in each room and met several characters along the way: Samuel, Wolfie (has kidney disease and is very



Pokey



Arges



Masi

thin but super friendly), Buster, Arges (what a lover!), Nicholas (looks just like my Marshall), Michaela and many more whose names I can't recall. As I was doing my "job," an employee was in the next cage and she thanked me for what I was doing; that loving on the cats makes all the difference and one of the most important things volunteers do. Great... just what I needed... another excuse to get choked up. I wanted to spend a little time with the "reception cats" and was pointed to an open closet which was home to Masi, an adorable neurological kitten who has chronic tremors causing her to be spastic and clumsy. Her affliction



Michaela

did *nothing* to stop her from being affectionate. On my way out, Tammy thanked me for taking my time with the cats. There wasn't *enough* time in my opinion.

At 4:05 p.m. I picked up JuJu for a sleepover. As I walked into cat headquarters. Sandra was like a mother sending her child off on their first day of school; she was *so* excited that I was giving JuJu this chance.

JuJu was a wonderful companion, very affectionate with a super personality. We watched TV together and at one point, she even crawled under the covers with me. The slightest noise outside and JuJu would go on full alert; quite



JuJu

the watchcat! Not a hint of aggression, they must be confusing this cat with another one if they think she bites!

Day 7 – Friday Dog Town and Kittyville – The Garden and Kitty Motel

Sandra was waiting anxiously for my report of JuJu's sleepover. She was so excited that JuJu was an excellent houseguest and I'm sure she's telling everyone "I told you so!" Vivian's first question was whether I still had all my fingers.

My last morning session at Dog Town was spent at The Garden with my old pals. I walked [the famous] Karina (2 turns), River (2 turns), Hopie (who reluctantly let me pet her) and Mercy. Instead of cleaning after feeding, Lupie told us to love on the dogs. I got very sloppy kisses from Uncle Sam, Trinket and others. Of course I showed favoritism to Anahi and Dandy giving them forbidden treats.

I was scheduled for Dog Town in the afternoon as well, but decided to go AWOL and spend it at Kitty Motel again loving all the cats since I had decided to take Nicholas on my last sleepover. I met Scoots, an office kitty whose back legs were amputated but that didn't stop him from "scooting" up to you for loving! Another volunteer was asked if she'd like to take Pokey outside and we both incredulously



Karina



Hopie and me

watched as she dragged herself outside to sit in the sun awhile. What amazing perseverance. One little girl, Mouse, has a terrible neurological disorder (worse than Masi) and has to be hand-fed each day because she can't feed herself. After loving everyone as best I could, I signed out Nicholas for the night. What a lover! He wanted nothing more than to lie next to me and have me pet him all night long. He even woke me several times because he wasn't getting any attention. I was entertaining serious thoughts of adopting him much to my dismay!



Scoots

Day 8 – Saturday The journey home

As soon as I stepped into Nicholas' building to drop him off, I turned into a teary mess. Nicholas was so great that I thought of stealing away with him. The caretakers encouraged me to talk to Vivian and she had me fill out an adoption application. I then spoke with Marc, the adoption specialist, who explained to me the adoption pro-

cess. They send a volunteer from the adoptee's area to the house for inspection and review/check the application thoroughly. The animal goes through medical testing to see if any issues need to be addressed. If approved, arrangements are made via Continental Airlines to fly the animal to his new home which may cost \$300-400. Finally he glanced at my application but turned me down after noting I had a cat door that provided outdoor access and that is an automatic reason for rejection. I was disrelieved (disappointed, yet relieved).

This has been *the* most rewarding and humbling experience for me. It was a privilege and an honor to have been a small part of the work being done at Best Friends. At times, it was hard work, but the hope of having made the smallest difference in one animal's day made it all worthwhile. I believe the animals did more to soothe *my* soul than I may have done for them. I left many tears and a piece of my heart at the sanctuary and to all the animals that crossed my path this past week I give thanks and a wish that you find your forever home.



Nicholas