Fond memories of my 67-year partner

by Lionel_Van_Deerlin

It was a hot July day in 1963 - especially in western Kansas, where the Van Deerlin family had stopped for ice cream on its way to Washington, D.C. In addition to plentiful belongings, our station wagon carried the new congressman, his wife and five children - plus a cat named Oddball.

Released from her makeshift birdcage for brief relief, Oddball disappeared up an alley. Since I'd opposed including a cat on the passenger manifest, I happily flung her cage into a vacant lot, preparing to renew our journey.

My wife, Mary Jo, would have none of it - not before placing a classified ad in the local weekly. Shortly after we'd left town, strange to say, Oddball strolled into the newspaper office and gave herself up. A telegram from the newspaper's publisher awaited our arrival in Washington. It said he was caring for Oddball in his home, adding facetiously: "Since ours is a Republican household, you may wish to send instructions for her shipment."

Within a few days, San Diego newspapers carried a front-page photo of their new congressman and a staffer prying open a crate, from which protruded Oddball's head. The outpouring of public approval that followed was, of course, due to my good fortune in having a wife whose qualities combined those of San Diego's first zoo director, Belle Benchley, and that revered friend to animals, St. Francis of Assisi. During our time in Washington, Mary Jo, whose death this week marked the end of a 67-year marriage, served a number of protective organizations - even as a board member of something called Tail Waggers! Her causes ranged from anti-vivisection to easing the plight of Tennessee walking horses, or urging acquaintances to shun veal.

She was a direct actionist, too. One of my dreariest recollections is of being aroused on a cold and stormy Sunday morning, summoned to a neighborhood storm drain. Mary Jo had detected the faint whimper of a litter of pups whose mother chose this endangered spot as a maternity ward. I strove manfully to reach the newborns amid rising waters, while icy rain beat on the nape of my neck. At last, utilizing whatever clout a congressman's wife can muster, Mary Jo commandeered an emergency D.C. street crew, who achieved a rescue by raising the sidewalk.

There were other notable rescues. One involved a Canada goose that somehow lost the use of a wing on its autumnal flight south. Finding it helpless in a wooded estate near our northwest Washington home, Mary Jo saw that it achieved a permanent perch in the National Zoo. In the same forest, she and the children once followed plaintiff yowls to where a fully grown cat had poked its head through the opening in a log, and was unable to get loose. Fur never grew again around three-quarters of the animal's neck, but it remained under our roof through its remaining eight lives. More than once, I've been ordered to stop along a busy highway while my wife defied traffic, and possibly the law, to reach an animal seemingly confused among the speeding cars.

Mary Jo once insisted that we share our motel room with a sickly feline she'd picked up on the way in. By checkout time, there were a half-dozen kittens to delay us.

On most such occasions I have gone along grudgingly, if in quiet admiration. An incident some 30 years ago, though, seemed to raise questions about Mary Jo's sense of priorities. While out jogging, I was assaulted by a pack of angry hounds from a nearby wood. The most vicious, a female shepherd, got within grazing range of my heels before I sent the pack scurrying with a fusillade of pebbles. Later in the day, I complimented a neighbor who had successfully trapped my tormentor and notified the city pound.

Several evenings later, I came home to learn that Mary Jo had forgiven her husband's attacker. She made a deal with the pound, waited the mandatory period for health tests, no doubt paid a fee (though I don't like thinking about it) and brought the shepherd out for some home cooking. I found it a guest in our basement, given the name Queenie and finding a place in my wife's variegated flock - ready to make friends and eventually accompany us back home to California.

No one can say whether our pets have status in a human heaven. But if they do, I know there was a whopping welcoming party there this week.

Van Deerlin represented a San Diego County district in Congress for 18 years.

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