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# TINY HEARTBEATS AMID THE WRECKAGE

by Brenda Shoss, 11/15/05

**"We have her,"** rescuer Jane Garrison says.

Three simple words. But for a woman, 84, in a Baton Rouge intensive care unit, they are reason to live. Her cat is alive, seven weeks after the storm.

As Hurricane Katrina headlines vanish from daily news, a little dog named Bubbles is found in a bathtub too weak to lift her head. A skin-and-bones Doberman mix is plucked from the trash. Some burrow under homes or linger in familiar yards. They are stealth shadows, glimpsed after dark. Many companion animals still fend for themselves in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

On October 1, 2005 the Humane Society of the U.S. (HSUS) left the state-designated shelter in Gonzales, LA. Garrison, a volunteer manager for HSUS rescue operations, co-founded Animal Rescue New Orleans (ARNO), one of few recovery missions left in New Orleans.

"Many animals are people's companions who escaped their homes when doors and windows blew open. It would be unethical to let them die on the streets," says Garrison, who struggles to recruit enough volunteers to dispense food/water at nearly 3,000 locations in and around New Orleans.

My own commitment to these animals began shortly after Katrina hit. That's when I found my 4-year-old son, a Cartoon Network junkie, glued to CNN Headline News. **"Mommy, I want to see if the people get out of their broken houses."**

I wept for people adrift on tree branches and floating down streets. But in the same instant, I knew who would be overlooked: Outgoing boys with floppy paws. A spoiled princess who slept on their beds. A soft tabby who nestled in their laps.

In early September Kinship Circle, a nonprofit animal advocacy organization, formed an alliance with Animal Rescue Foundation (ARF), a no-kill shelter in Mobile, Alabama. Under the banner *Grassroots*



**Effort for Animals of the Storm**, ARF's Julia Fischer and I mobilized volunteers and supplies to over 80 shelters and triage sites across Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Texas.

Truckloads of cages, live traps, hay and horse feed left our storehouse in Mobile. By mid-October, we'd distributed over 20,000 pounds of animal food, 1,000 pounds of kitty litter, 500 crates, \$5,000 worth of vaccines, \$10,000 in veterinary supplies, 10 pallets of water, and more than 5,000 bowls, leashes, collars, and toys.

About the time my son thought Mommy had mutated with her computer and phone, evacuee Brenda Johnson called. She begged me to find her dog, a Yorkshire terrier, 11, trapped in an apartment on Roger Drive in New Orleans East. "Can you save our Spike? He's big, probably 15 pounds.

We thought we'd be back in a couple of days...

As Brenda spoke I overheard children, an aunt, a niece and a brother crowded into one hotel room. I also heard the despair in her voice.

I filed reports and perused lost pet photos. I granted rescuers permission to break into Brenda's apartment. But with each passing day I wondered, "Will the heat, starvation, or water finally take him?"

Spike's uncertain fate haunted me. His salvation, along with tens of thousands of stranded companion animals seemed contingent on little more than chance. Eleven days post-Katrina, rescuer Paul Berry of Best Friends in Kanab, Utah, wrote: "You hear fluff pieces on TV about people reunited with their pets. But [from the boats] you see this vast, endless wasteland of toxic water... and animals clinging to life."

Some nights, my friend Tim Gorski phoned from the Winn Dixie parking lot while volunteering with Grass Roots Animal Rescue. Behind his voice, I heard barks and howls cast into the darkness.

In retrospect, a strategy to accommodate animals might have saved humans as well. On 9/8/05, CNN listed "People won't leave their pets" as a chief reason some 10,000 stragglers wouldn't vacate under Mayor Ray Nagin's mandatory evacuations.

A disaster plan that forces evacuees to choose between survival and their animals is a *bad plan*. Post-Katrina images are unforgivable: A white dog is ripped from a boy's arms as he boards a bus. A yellow Lab, marooned on a rooftop, watches his family disappear in a helicopter. An elderly woman cannot get medical aid unless she deserts her cats.

When Katrina hit Plaquemines Parish, south of New Orleans, homes and schools toppled over roadways. Two protective levees crumbled. Oil tanks burst, spilling millions of gallons of black crude.

Still, life persevered. Hundreds of dogs swarmed Guardsmen for food and water. Cats devoured MREs from kindhearted troops. Bewildered horses and cows floated in watery fields.

I contacted the New Mexico National Guard to gain entry into "no-go" Plaquemines. I found a kindred spirit in Major Kimberly Lalley. Soon rescue teams led by Cris (a firefighter) and Sarah Stevens and Terri Kelley of Indiana cleared security checkpoints with permission from Colonel Dick Almeter.

**The problem with the animal disaster plan is that there was no plan — other than the mercy of volunteers and soldiers.**

Once the human search became body retrieval, why didn't the White House, Defense Department, Homeland Security, and the states of Louisiana and Mississippi authorize active and reserve component troops to conduct animal relief missions?

With human aid well underway, why didn't Governors Blanco and Barbour direct rescue boats, air-conditioned trucks, medical personnel and other responders to recover animals?

Instead, the world witnessed an unprecedented phenomenon: Entire ghost towns filled with dogs,

cats, birds and horses. Among them, a beloved Yorkie named Spike waited beneath a child's bed.

On September 16 Brenda Johnson called me. "They found Spike. He is alive." This elderly dog, prone to seizures, survived without food or water for more than two weeks.

My plea for Spike had reached Jefferson Feed store, a makeshift triage site in New Orleans. From there, someone named Jennifer phoned Nathalie, who spoke to ground crews from her New Jersey home. Finally, two vet techs with Florida's Collier County Animal League happened to be with police and firemen when they got Spike's report. Under official escort, they broke into Brenda's home with a huge "Hello!" for the little Yorkie.

An animal's life often relied upon an out-of-state

unsterilized and set to yield even more puppies and kittens. One study shows a dog and her young can produce 67,000 puppies in six years. A cat and her litter can create 420,000 kittens in seven years.

Rotties, pits, poodles and spaniels run in packs in St. Bernard Parish, a ravaged area with no animal control. LA-SPCA, animal control for Orleans Parish, doesn't have the resources to trap/shelter so many animals.

I'd intended to exit hurricane rescue by Halloween. Instead, I'm on-call for ARNO, along with co-founders Garrison, David Meyer and Pia Salk. Kate Danaher of San Francisco and I field some 300-500 emails daily as national volunteer co-coordinators. We deploy ACOs, humane trappers, DVMs and techs from everywhere. We find hotels, campsites, FEMA tents and resident homes for volunteers. As ARNO's



David Meyer and Pia Salk, ARNO co-founders in New Orleans. Both were first HSUS volunteers.

network in the right place at the right time. By October's end, requests to find animals still poured in. Yet the state declared local animal control in charge, essentially ordering non-Louisiana volunteers to go home.

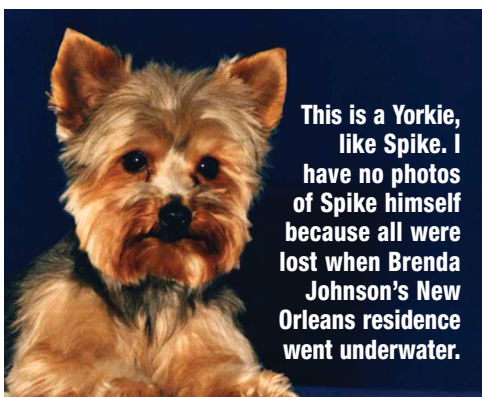
Governor Kathleen Blanco, under advisement from Assistant State Veterinarian Martha Littlefield, refused to extend Executive Order KBB 2005-35 to let licensed veterinarians from other states temporarily practice in Louisiana. The order's firm 10/25/05 deadline meant incoming vets risked jail time and fines.

As I write, displaced pets have multiplied New Orleans already large stray population. Most are

food/water assignments director, I work with ground director Cadi Schiffer to sustain 2,800 stations across 650 sq. miles of Orleans, St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes.

In 11/05, rescuers find two dead cats by empty bowls. A third is dead on a barren porch. These animals endured wind and water only to die by starvation... **I don't know how this story ends. For me, it comes back to Spike. His life is the miracle of strangers united over phone and internet — people navigating ruins to salvage 15 pounds of furry love.**

**Spike is alive and I found a friend in Brenda Johnson. This story is about compassion. It's about saving Spike.**



This is a Yorkie, like Spike. I have no photos of Spike himself because all were lost when Brenda Johnson's New Orleans residence went underwater.

Jane Garrison, HSUS volunteer & ARNO co-founder, New Orleans. Cow in floods, by Paul Sancya