

ALUMNI

Rapid City's Own "Witch in the Glen": Hundreds of Animals Saved in Backyard Rescue by NAU Distinguished Alumna



Mickie Hortness, front center, with her NAU veterinary technician graduating class.

After receiving her first degree, Mickie Hortness worked for the book retailer Waldenbooks for 12 years.

“For many years, I really enjoyed having a job where I was surrounded by books every day,” said Mickie. “But, I eventually grew tired of working in retail and needed something different.”

Since childhood, books and animals have been Mickie’s two great loves.

“And that’s when it clicked,” said Mickie. “I had given many years to books. Now it was time to

work with animals. I followed my heart.”

So, in 1995, Mickie’s heart led her to National American University (NAU), where she enrolled in its veterinary technician program, within NAU’s College of Health and Sciences.

While still pursuing her degree, she secured a job at the Canyon Lake Veterinary Hospital.

Her compassion and skill were immediately evident to her instructors and employer. So much so, that in 1997 she received the first annual “Dana Award” in recognition of the “Human Animal Bond.” The award, named after the beloved pet of Dr. Marilyn Holmgren, now the Dean of NAU’s College of Health and Sciences, has been awarded annually since 1997.

Upon graduation in 1999, she obtained her veterinary technician license and continued working at the Canyon Lake Veterinary Hospital. It was here that Mickie’s reputation, and life’s work, as wildlife rescuer was secured.

“I always thought it would be neat to be like the Witch in the Glen,” said Mickie referencing the character in the children’s book, “The Three Lives of Tomasina” who saved animals.

“They called me the Bird Lady,” said Mickie, whose rescue efforts began with a couple of baby birds, but quickly grew from there. In hindsight, Mickie herself could have predicted that this is what she would end up doing.

“As a kid, I loved the movie ‘The Three Lives of Thomasina,’” said Mickie. “One of the characters was the Witch in the Glen. The children in the town would bring her injured animals and she would magically cure them. I always thought it would be neat to be like the Witch in the Glen.”

“Soon after I had taken in a couple of birds, people started bringing me orphaned and injured mammals,” said Mickie. “I did all the required paperwork and was issued the federal permit allowing me to rehabilitate birds. I also was issued the state permit required to rehabilitate mammals. And the word just spread.”

Many of the animals that Mickie cared for were brought to the Canyon Lake Veterinary Hospital.

“I can’t thank Dr. Jim Mortimer enough for supporting me in these efforts,” said Mickie of the retired owner of the clinic. “Our clinic didn’t treat wildlife, but Dr. Mortimer taught me and let me use the space for treatment and surgeries. I could not have done all that in my backyard.”

“Each time I released an animal, I said ‘Have a good life,’” she said with a smile. “I’d like to think most of them did.”

Yet, she did save hundreds of animals by treating them and helping them rehabilitate in her own small backyard, right off a main road with neighbors on both sides.

“Foxes, rabbits, squirrels, a bobcat, many fawns, and a baby porcupine to name a few,” she reflected. “And many, many birds, including swans, geese, a burrowing owl, and a great blue heron.”

Mickie’s husband, Larry, who works in construction, supported Mickie’s vocation by building animal cages for their backyard rescue.

“He also did most of the cooking,” said Mickie, who was clearly grateful. “He was so patient and just let me do what I needed to do. As you can imagine, it took a lot of time and a lot of space.”

Mickie approached each animal with the intent that it would be rehabilitated and released back into the wild, and a large percentage were.

“The most important and also most difficult objective was not to let the animal bond with you,” she said. “These were not pets and as much as I wanted to cuddle and love them, especially the babies, I knew I would not be doing them any favors to let them get used to people and then release them in the wild.”





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That approach also meant she did not let many people, even friends, interact with the animals.

“My husband and I went on very few vacations. I was concerned that by introducing another person, the risk of getting used to people increased. There was really only one other close friend I trusted to watch after the animals when I had to leave town.”

Her desire to keep an emotional distance between her and the animals, at least from the animals’ perspectives, does not mean she did not have favorites.

Among her favorites is a great blue heron whom she rescued, twice.

“He was as tall as me with these pencil thin legs,” said Mickie. “Such an amazing bird. I got him fixed up and released him near a heron rookery near where Dr. Mortimer lived. He flew off and we hoped he would join the others. I thought all was well.”

The heron, however, was later found weak and starving in a residential area near the rookery. Mickie intervened once again and saw that the bird was very thin and weak and was also suffering from parasites. After a few more weeks of rehabilitation, lots of food and TLC, he was released a second time, this time successfully.

The baby porcupine and the bobcat kitten were also memorable because they were so unique.

“A guy had the kitten his garage,” recalled Mickie of the young bobcat. “I have no idea how he got it, but when he was out of town, his wife called Game, Fish & Parks and they called me. I always wondered how the husband reacted when he got home.”



She also remembers interesting animal friendships. Her favorite is when a young goose befriended a small fawn.

“The fawn was part of trio I was helping and the other two were much stronger and bigger than the smaller fawn, so they played pretty rough with him,” recalled Mickie. “For whatever reason this young goose felt an attachment to the fawn and served as its protector.”



Over the years, however, two animals who captured her heart stand out.

“Traveler was a crow that I rescued,” said Mickie. “He was so young when he came to me that I had to hand feed him. He even went on a road trip with us and just sat up in the backseat. That’s how he got his name, Traveler.”

Traveler had no injuries. He was just a young crow that someone had found. He was malnourished, thin. Once he was healthy and was flying, my husband built him a big enclosure in the backyard so he had lots of room to fly and strengthen his wings. When he was ready, we just opened the enclosure.”



Initially, Traveler would venture out but would return at night. He then began venturing farther and socializing with other crows but he would usually return home at night, hanging out at the top of a tall tree in Mickie’s backyard.

“He’d bring me presents, like shiny stones and objects, and liked to preen my eyelashes,” Mickie recalled smiling.

One day, when Mickie was leaving for work, Traveler flew in, making a loud racket.

“He was just hollering and hollering at me,” said Mickie. “That was the last day I saw him. I think he was trying to tell me goodbye, or he wanted me to come with him. Crows

are just so smart. On occasion, I’ll see a crow at the top of our tree and wonder if that’s Traveler checking on us.”

One memory, however, still brings tears to her eyes.

“Digger was a burrowing owl,” said Mickie. “He saved me twice from having to euthanize him.”

Digger had injured both legs and was left unable to stand. Mickie worked to rehabilitate him by taking his legs in her hands and gently moving them around to restore strength and range of motion.

When Digger didn’t improve, and still couldn’t stand, Mickie made the difficult decision to euthanize him.

“He could not stand, which really meant there was no other choice.” she said.

Yet, when Mickie approached Digger to prepare him for the trip to the veterinary clinic, he was standing up.

“I couldn’t believe it,” recalled Mickie.

This apparent miracle, however, was trumped by red tape.

“There is a limit to how long you can keep a wild bird for the purpose of rehabilitation, even if they can’t be released to the wild,” said Mickie. “I had kept Digger longer than what was allowed.”

Mickie faced a difficult choice. Keeping Digger meant she could lose her license and be unable to help the animals in her care, then and in the future. Releasing Digger meant his certain death. Even though he could stand, his legs were still weak and he would never be able to survive in the wild. He wouldn't have been able to catch prey.

“I felt my only choice, again, was to euthanize Digger,” she said. “So many other animals needed me and Digger was not going to survive in the wild.”

However, that’s not where this story ends.

“When I went to get Digger from his enclosure to take him to the vet, he was laying at the bottom of his cage. I picked him up and our eyes met. I knew he was dying.” recalls Mickie with tears in her eyes. “I think he somehow knew he needed to make this sacrifice and in doing so saved me.”



Mickie’s wildlife rescue journey came to end in 2013, but it didn’t happen overnight.

True to the compassion that Mickie brought to the endeavor for all those years, she kept on helping those in her care, while taking fewer and fewer animals in.

"I really started phasing the program out in 2010. I stopped taking in the larger mammals that year and gradually took in fewer and fewer birds and small mammals over the next few years."

“It was a very difficult decision. I do think about the animals I have saved and wonder how they are doing; and I think about the animals I’ve turned away since ending the program. But, I have done what I can do. I owe myself and my husband the freedom to travel and do the things we want to do.”

“Now I just have to convince him to retire,” she says with a laugh.

That’s not to say Mickie is just sitting around.

She and Larry have several cats, three dogs, three doves, and three aquariums. She also continues to work at the Canyon Lake Veterinary Hospital two days a week and once a week at BAM Bookstore. Mickie and Larry also foster dogs through the Oglala Pet Project (OPP), as they have for many years, and she handles its medical records and sends reminders to other foster homes about appointments and shots coming due.

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That’s Mickie’s idea of slowing down.

In recognition of Mickie’s successful career as a registered veterinary technician and her impact, on the feathered and furry inhabitants, not to mention the pet owners, in her community, Mickie was recently named National American University’s 2018 Distinguished Service Alumni. She will receive the award at the 2018 graduation ceremony in Rapid City this June.

This year also marks the last year of NAU’s veterinary technician program, 40 years after it welcomed its first student.



It’s news Mickie finds bittersweet. She has continued to help the college by speaking to students and its longtime leaders, Dr. Peggy Behrens, Dr. Linda Rabe, and Dennis Lively.

“Graduates of NAU’s veterinary technician program are working in clinics throughout Rapid City and the Black Hills-area,” said Mickie. “I’m sad to know the program is ending, but also very proud to be part of that legacy.”

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