

Stupid pet choices

"Don't adopt a pig," cautions Kerry Hilliard, "unless you want to live like one." With strong snouts and sharp hooves, these animals love to dig, root, and wallow wherever they are, be it your back yard or your living room. Below, Emus stand six feet tall, can leap high fences and run fast. They also like shiny jewelry and will pluck it from you whether it's attached to your skin or not.

Photos by Phil Audibert



When people say they want to adopt a pig, Kerry Hilliard asks them "Would you like to live in a pig pen?" Of course, they answer, "No."

Rikki's Refuge is the end of the line for 32 unwanted potbellied pigs, each one the result of someone's poor judgment in pet choices. Kerry goes on a roll. "Pigs root, that's what they do. It's their natural thing; they dig things up with their nose; they chew things; they want to chew all the time."

She leans slightly forward to emphasize her point. "You can put them anywhere, in a beautiful field of grass, a back yard, flowers, and it...will...be...a... mud...pit." She enunciates her words carefully making sure that you understand. "They also love to roll in the mud, and if you don't give them mud, they will make it. They'll dig a pile of stuff up and pee in it to make mud. And if it's in your house and you don't have any dirt handy and you don't have any plants they can dump over, they will chew up your carpet and pee in it to make a mushy sort of stuff to roll in."

She opens her eyes wide and adds, "They also eat drywall; their nose can root right through drywall... They are also very social. You get just one and it's constantly trying to go away and make friends somewhere. So it digs out from underneath fences... They're a handful. They're very smart. They're very nice, but I don't think they really belong in your house." She pauses to make her point. "Don't...take...a... pig...home."

The same is true of goats, who usually wind up at Rikki's Refuge because they did not work out as lawnmowers. "People find out six months later after they've eaten the bumper off of their car and their cell phone and their window sills and their hoses; they discover goats don't eat grass." Besides she adds, after wintertime feed and medical care, goats are "going to be way more expensive than it's going to cost to put gasoline in your lawnmower." Indoors, goats will eat furniture. Their hooves will scratch hardwood floors, crack tiles. Outdoors they thrive on ornamentals. "They will completely decimate anything decorative or ornamental before they even begin on your weeds."

Ducks and geese...more poor choices in pets. Disgruntled owners complain that "they're flying around and pooping on everything." Emus... they can jump high fences and run like a

bat out of hell, which can be unfortunate if they have your jewelry in their beak. Yes, anything bright and shiny...particularly piercings; they'll grab it right off of you whether it's attached to your skin or not.

Easter and bunny rabbits. Along about May, here they come to Rikki's Refuge because they're not cute anymore. Remember the phrase, breeding like rabbits? Bet you didn't know this about them. "An un-spayed female is a real problem," says Kerry, deathly serious. "They have so much sexual pent up energy, they become dangerous. They are vicious and they will attack. An un-spayed female rabbit will kill a neutered male. They are the most unbelievably sexually aggressive female animal I have ever met." Aw, what a cute little bunny wabbit.

Dogs: Most of the residents in Doggie Downs are elderly unwanted hunting hounds. Take Walker for example. He's gun shy. To prove it, his owner shot him, then dumped him at the Orange County Animal Shelter. He arrived at Rikki's a year ago, a survivor but un-adoptable and terrified. Slowly they gained his trust, socialized him, put him out in a big exercise run with other dogs. "His tail went up and he started wagging his tail, leaping and jumping and playing with the other dogs." Orange County Animal Shelter Director, Beth Hamilton, who has a close relationship with Rikki's, was amazed. "That's the first time she'd seen him show any sign of happiness at all."

Walker was adopted out a couple of weeks ago to a woman who just lost the Springer Spaniel she adopted from this same sanctuary years ago. It was love at first sight. "He just put his head in her hands...he never does that with strangers." Walker is now sharing a place in Reston with Orange Charlie, the dumpster cat with the hot spot...a great success story.

Then there are tragedies: pet owners grow old too. They die or have to go to the nursing home where they can't keep their four-legged friends. These pets can be old-timers too. They

wind up at the shelter or at Rikki's, un-adoptable because of age, depressed even. The folks at Rikki's try to cheer them up, even force feed them, "and a lot of times they'll die anyway."

People have sometimes dropped animals at the refuge gates. "I hate it when they do that," snaps Kerry who has seen everything from guinea pigs to vicious dogs tied up at the entrance a half mile up from the farmhouse. "We have a budget, we have to stay within that budget. We have space requirements. So, we can't just take anything that's dumped at the gate." Take the unwanted animal to the Orange County Animal Shelter first, she recommends.

"Part of the reason we're here is to show people that animals deserve respect. They deserve to live out their lives naturally. They shouldn't be used as products and so forth; they shouldn't be gotten and gotten rid of and traded back and forth. And I think the best way to do that is by example or by gently talking to people... To me, it works better for me to be here taking care of these guys and bringing school kids in to meet them than it does protesting at a slaughterhouse." Needless to say, Kerry Hilliard is a vegetarian. "How can you have a sick pig in your hospital and then eat bacon for breakfast?" she winces.

Asked if she has problems with people owning pets, Kerry replies, "No, as long as they adopt their pet and keep it for the rest of their lives. I don't like people who get pets and then get rid of them in two years; the puppy or kitten is not cute anymore, so you get rid of it and get a young one, or you move so you get rid of it, or it has babies and you get rid of it, the disposable part of it I don't like."

If she has one message to get across it would be this: "Don't breed it. Neuter and spay."

Rikki's Refuge is a 501 3(c) non-profit organization. It gratefully accepts donations by Paypal, check, credit card or cash. To learn more go to www.rikkisrefuge.org.



Crazy old cat ladies



Photos by Phil Audibert

Above, dozens of cats, all positive for feline leukemia, rush to greet Rikki's Refuge Executive Director, Kerry Hilliard. Kept separate from the rest of the cats at the sanctuary, these animals will be fed, watered and cared for, for the rest of their lives. Below, Kerry Hilliard is a self-admitted "crazy old cat lady." She knows the names of virtually every one of the 638 cats currently residing in long runs at the sanctuary.



Rikki's Refuge

Kerry Hilliard has 638 cats. She knows just about every one by name. "I might have a little trouble with two black ones in the same run, but...you just get to know them. They all have different personalities."

This invites the inevitable question. Kerry are you a crazy old cat lady? "Yes, beyond a doubt," she readily confirms, adding, "Virtually all of my friends are crazy old cat ladies too." Then she quickly adds that these "crazy old cat ladies" are people who adopt, shelter, and feed un-adoptable cats; they are not psycho hoarders who obsessively collect and neglect animals.

She steps into a run full of cats, all of whom have feline leukemia. Dozens rush to her, tails button-hooked in greeting. A dainty little black kitty jumps in her lap and she cradles it fondly. In a farmhouse that has been converted into an animal hospital, Kerry eases through a screen door into what's called the "assisted living, retirement and psycho ward." She casually rattles off names and ailments of various cats. "Vinegar is just an old man. Orange Charlie is just a mess. He is typically what we call a 'dump kitty.'" He has a hot spot that won't heal. She points to what looks like a Persian. "Mariah here is an extremely expensive pure-bred cat. People allegedly paid \$3,700 for her. And when they spent more than that in vet bills to solve her problems they decided to get rid of her." Guess who deals with Mariah's problems now?

Welcome to Rikki's Refuge, a secluded 330-acre animal sanctuary between Nasons and Grassland. There are cats all over the place here, underfoot, hang-

ing out in long pens and in prefab huts. But it's not just cats. Rikki's Refuge is also home to 31 dogs, 32 pot-bellied pigs, nine sheep, 35 goats, two cows, 35 rabbits, 20 guinea pigs, six pigeons, one pheasant, 300 chickens, geese, ducks and guinea fowl, three peacocks, six emus, and a partridge in a pear tree. Seriously, they have a Chukka partridge here, and he will might have had access to a pear tree, except that it was devoured by the goats, along with everything else ornamental.

Still, the main event is cats... 638 of them give or take one or two. They live in long runs of wire and netting and seek shelter from the elements in prefab sheds and converted dog houses. Except for the occasional hiss, spit and snarl, they seem to get along with each other pretty well. And that's a good thing because for most of these animals, Rikki's Refuge is the end of the line.

You see, Rikki's is a refuge for the un-adoptable. "This is the end of the road... absolutely," nods Kerry. "If nobody else on the planet wants you, we'll try and take you." But take a number, because the waiting list is long. "I have to have enough money in my budget to be able to cover an incoming animal for the rest of its life. If I take an animal today, I may be looking at 10 or 20 years."

That's because all animals here will live out their days in relative peace and prosperity until nature calls them to cross "The Rainbow Bridge." This actually happened just last night to one of the feline leukemia patients. "After you've seen this a number of times, you know when you've reached the point when they're not going to get better. And I just held him for a couple of hours until he passed on," says Kerry.

This is what a no-kill facility really is. It does not mean they always let nature take its course, no matter how brutal. "When we really believe that it is hopeless, if they are dying painfully, we euthanize," nods Kerry. "If they are dying comfortably we allow them to die in our arms with us... No kill does not mean we never use euthanasia; it means we don't use euthanasia for population control or because we don't like you or because we want to get somebody new in." Kerry estimates only a half dozen are euthanized each year at Rikki's compared to "six to eight million animals euthanized every year in this country... perfectly healthy adoptable animals."

At the other end of the line, are the success stories... the 150 to 200 animals that Rikki's adopts out each year. In fact, there is a whole network of volunteers who move animals to where the adoption action is. "Certain animals just move in certain parts of the country better than others do, for whatever reason," shrugs Kerry.



Kerry Hilliard holds a diabetic cat while Lena Stocks draws a sample to check its blood sugar.

Photo by Phil Audibert

Now, hear this: Rikki's Refuge receives 200 requests to take in animals every day! The average population of Rikki's Refuge is 1,200 animals; they don't have room for any more. If she took in every applicant, she could double the sanctuary population in six days!

1200 animals. Like a dysfunctional family at a reunion, all these beasts want to talk at once. The resulting din of quacks, bleats, barks, meows, honks, crows, moos, grunts, cackles, and chirps is deafening. Yet somehow, all these animals, including the humans, have worked out a symbiotic living arrangement here... a sort of peaceable kingdom, where the lion has warily lain down with the lamb.

For instance, although most of the dogs, cats, pigs, emus, and sheep are con-

finied for obvious reasons, other animals, such as ducks, geese, guinea fowl, even goats are allowed to roam free. "You're not allowed to run around if you don't stay," cautions Kerry. "The dogs are allowed free range if they promise not to eat anybody and not run away." And to become a free running mascot dog, "you have to get along with everybody."

Keeping 1,200 animals fed and healthy costs money. Kerry and her staff of four feed 85 pounds of dried cat food and 25 cases of canned cat food each day. The pigs eat 100 pounds of feed daily "and as much left over fresh produce as we can possibly get... they can eat a whole pick-up truck load of produce in a day."

In the modest farmhouse that is the three-ward animal hospital, Kerry and staffers go over the routine medications that 80 to 90 animals need every day until they die. Her daily medical log routinely runs 15 pages. Even with generous discounts in time and medications from the good folks at Culpeper Animal Hospital, it costs \$78,000 yearly to keep these beasts

ies just in food and meds.

Staffers primarily provide nursing care here... managing diabetics, epileptics, that sort of thing. "We can treat here," says Kerry. "We've got all the regular antibiotics and stuff like that." Although they are not allowed to have controlled substances, the medical staff can actually do more than veterinary technicians can because they are not working on somebody else's animals for money. "I can't practice medicine without a license," explains Kerry, "but we can treat our own animals, just like people do livestock." She gratefully acknowledges Doctors Meredith Vargas and John Bond for training her staff to administer routine treatments, vaccinations and to do blood work.

One thing they are not allowed to do is vaccinate for rabies. A vet has to do that, and "every mammal here is vaccinated, even our guinea pigs." More importantly, every mammal is also either neutered and/or spayed. Contagious disease cases are quarantined, and all animals are treated for parasites. A peek inside the hospital reveals a clutter of stacked cages and tubs of medications. Hospital bedding is changed daily. Against the wall, an overworking washer/dryer huffs and puffs trying to keep up. A donated case of antibacterial hand wash will be used up within a month.

Charitable donations are the only thing that keeps Rikki's going. The annual budget is \$350,000. "That includes salaries for staff, vet bills, food, parasite prevention, utilities, everything," says Kerry. How does she raise it? "I beg," she replies succinctly. She

has an e-mail address list of 10,000 and distributes the refuge's weekly (if she gets around to it) newsletter, Hairballs, to 5,000. Around this time of year and up through Christmas, donations pick up, but "I had to borrow \$35,000 bucks just to get through the summer."

In the beginning she'd hoped to rely on volunteers, and she is grateful for them, but adds realistically "volunteers will come when it's a nice sunny day, but not too hot, have something fun to do but they don't want to clean up poop... It's really hard to get the volunteers to do the down and dirty."

Even when people apply for a job here, she asks them to volunteer for a day to see what it's really like. "People think working in an animal sanctuary means feeding the nice little lamb that never goes to the bathroom or things like that. They don't realize it means cleaning it up. That's the majority of it is cleaning up what these guys do all day long. And people are just so shocked when they find out that's what it's all about."

It's hard to say when Kerry Hilliard's day begins and ends because she's up and checking hospital patients all night long. On a typical day, she'll arise at 4 a.m. to do hospital rounds. Chief Medical Officer, Lena Stocks rolls in around 5 and together they do treatments up until the rest arrive at a more humane hour. At that point it is a matter of cleaning up droppings (400 pounds of cat poop every day), cleaning runs, changing bedding, feeding and water-



There are about 300 geese, ducks, chickens, and guinea fowl running free at Rikki's Refuge. Because the sanctuary is so secluded, almost a mile from a paved road, they don't seem to bother the neighbors with their incessant honking, quacking, clucking and crowing.

Photo by Phil Audibert

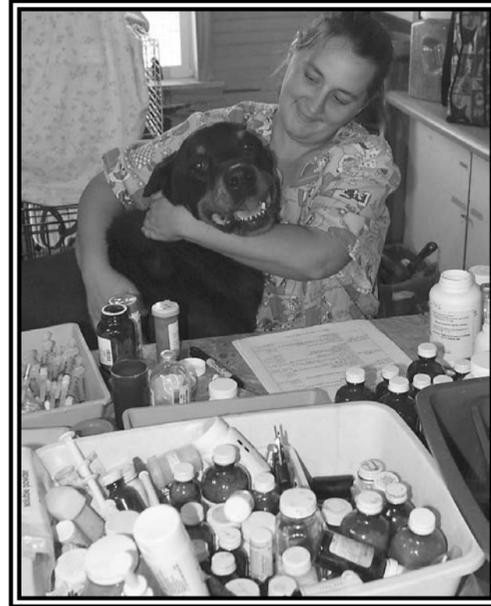


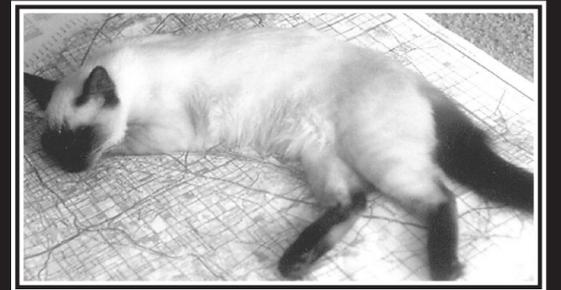
Photo by Phil Audibert

Rikki's Refuge Medical Director, Lena Stocks admits that she is more of a dog person than a cat person. Neko the Rottweiler owes his life to Lena who nursed him back from the brink of death. In the foreground, you can see some of the medications she must administer daily to 60 to 80 animals.

estate business, Rikki's Realty is plowed back into the refuge.

Crazy old cat ladies. Kerry Hilliard looks over her shoulder and points to the farmhouse that is now the hospital. "When I used to sleep in the house, I'd have 30 or 40 in bed with me." Now she sleeps in the old motor home and she'll only take two or three in for the night. "It's an inherited problem," she says blaming her mother.

So what does this crazy old cat lady do for fun? A faraway look blows over her face. "Once in a blue moon I get off scuba diving." Her dad has a sailboat in the Caribbean. "We go out to the out islands where there's no people, no nothing and we swim with sharks for relaxation. It's the only time I can really, really not have other issues and problems on my mind. If you're surrounded by a bunch of sharks and all you're doing is watching how deep you are, how much air do I have left and how close are the sharks, you don't worry about anything else. It is fabulous relaxation."



Contributed photo

Here's Rikki, after whom the refuge is named, apparently relaxing on a map of Chicago. The breed is called Balinese. It looks like a long-haired Siamese.

Rikki's Story

It starts with Kerry's mother, a certified crazy old cat lady in her own right. She was living in Chicago when she fell deathly ill... was not expected to survive. Kerry bought, at the time, an extremely rare Balinese cat, "and snuck him into the hospital, and she (the mother) survived. So, that was kind of like her incentive to get well." Rikki, as the cat was named, lived to the ripe old age of 16.

Meanwhile, Kerry who was running a successful real estate business in Northern Virginia found some property in Orange County. At the time she was hosting a live radio talk show about animals and she hatched the idea that the farm would be an ideal animal sanctuary. "It is very secluded. There's 70 acres open and 300 surrounding it in woods. So, you're private and isolated and you don't become a nuisance to neighbors and stuff. It's a great location. There's water on the property for livestock and wild animals."

Well lo and behold that crazy old cat lady, her own mom, called in and offered to buy the property, as long as it would be named after the cat that had "rescued" her. The deal was sealed in August of 1998, and by March the following year, they had started work. About the toughest thing they had to do was hand-dig a half mile of water line... trenches 24" deep, 4" wide. "I lost a lot of volunteers over that project," groans Kerry. They also established a pet cemetery called The Rainbow Bridge. The first animal to take up residency there was Rikki, himself; the first human to rest there was Kerry's mom.

Originally, Kerry says, "I had no interest in running an animal sanctuary. I was a yuppie and I ran all over the place scuba diving and I had no intention of giving that up to clean up cat poop all day long." But it turned out that the couple who, had volunteered to move here and run the refuge, backed out. Kerry, the city girl, had no choice but to jump in headfirst. She admits she learned a lot of things the hard way. Still, she adds, "I've grown to really love it. I realized after awhile that this is where I was meant to be."