

REACHING THE BAR

Stories from Women at All Stages
of Their Law Careers



Edited by Robin Sax, JD

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Pets in the Cross Fire



Allie Phillips

RACKETEERING, RIOTS, ORGANIZED prostitution, insider corporate embezzlement, extortion, child sexual abuse, and a triple murder—such cases may be high-profile, but they weren't the ones that touched my heart as assistant prosecuting attorney in Michigan. The cases I remember most, even ten years later, are the secret crimes of familial abuse and their victims, both human and animal.

It was when I met a woman named Jane that I was struck by an idea that is now saving the lives of many American women, children, and their pets. I was an idealistic new assistant prosecuting attorney, and I was there to change the world. I had been assigned to district court to handle misdemeanor cases, and now, on trial day, I was facing a full docket of domestic violence cases. My crime victim, Jane, appeared to be in her early 30s. She was tiny, stick-thin, and standing all alone in a corner of the crowded courthouse hallway, shifting her feet uneasily, eyes downcast, in the classic posture of a woman who has been abused.

I approached her, introduced myself, and brought her into the conference room that served as my courtroom office, witness prepara-

tion room, and waiting area for my witnesses. Jane sat down, then kept her gaze on the floor when she announced, "Look, I want the charges dismissed against my husband. My dogs and goat are still at home and I know he will hurt them if I go through with this. He's killed my pets before and I can't survive another one dying because of me."

I sighed. These were the cases I dreaded most. It was not in my nature to let an abuser walk free from a crime, but I was not trained to handle victims' safety issues. As a lifelong animal lover, all I could offer was to find a foster home for her pets and keep Jane safe at a shelter.

Jane knew that the only way to keep her beloved pets alive would be to return to her abuser, and I watched with quiet fury as Jane's husband walked out of court a free man that day. I never saw her again. In my career as a frontline trial prosecutor, about 70 percent of my domestic violence cases ended in dismissal because the victim was unable or unwilling to testify. At the time, I could have added Jane's case to the pile of dismissed cases and then forgotten about her.

But for some reason, Jane's case remained with me. While she could have saved herself, she chose to stay in an abusive home just to keep her pets alive. Others might call it folly or stupidity, and they might be right. But to me, the woman was demonstrating dedication to beloved animals that went beyond her own personal survival.

Jane's decision inspired me to dream of a day when domestic violence shelters allowed women and children to bring their family pets with them. It took eight years, but finally one day, I took a step to make it happen.

I WAS HIRED by the National District Attorneys Association as a senior attorney to train for the National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse. In that capacity, I created a training program focusing on the link between animal cruelty and child abuse. The academic research is clear that when there is any violence in the home—even toward a

pet—no one is safe. I trained prosecutors, law enforcement, and other professionals how to keep families safe. Then I introduced a new concept: domestic violence shelters that allow abused women and children to bring their companion pets with them.

I have now spent five years training across the country on this issue and have begun to see—very slowly—a handful of domestic violence shelters that allow pets to accompany their owners. When I joined the American Humane Association as the director of public policy, I knew the time had come to officially launch the concept.

In February 2008, the Pets and Women's Shelter (PAWS) Program was born. The concept is simple and is contained in a 40-page manual detailing how to add a new dimension to domestic violence shelters as safe havens for people and their pets. The manual outlines different options for housing these animals, either inside or outside the shelter, and describes such issues as how to address allergies and pet noises; housing aggressive, abused, or exotic pets; legal issues; obtaining veterinary care; and fund-raising and mobilizing the community to help. The manual can be downloaded from www.americanhumane.org.

When I wrote the PAWS manual, I recalled my first pet-housing domestic violence shelter visit. It was October 2004 and I was invited to give a presentation on the connection between animal cruelty and human violence at the Shelter for Abused Women and Children in Naples, Florida. The Naples shelter was likely the first in the country to provide on-site housing of pets from domestic violence homes.

When I arrived at the shelter, I first made my way to the kennel room to see my dream vision in action, but also because I was missing my cats and needed a dose of pet therapy while traveling. The kennel room is located inside the shelter, yet separated from the residential rooms to avoid allergic reactions. When I arrived, I found a room that had been converted from a utility room into a kennel. There was a counter and sink and six large dog crates in the room. A door

led outside to a nice play area for the dogs. The Naples shelter truly epitomized the PAWS concept that housing pets can be as simple or difficult as one chooses. Naples chose the simple method.

In the kennel that particular day was the daintiest of cats. She was a beautiful yellow tabby with just one newborn kitten. The cat was malnourished, and malnutrition was probably why she'd given birth to only one kitten. The cat was desperate for a kind touch and purred loudly when I cuddled her. Somehow, I didn't care about getting cat hair all over my new black suit.

While I was visiting with the cat and her baby, the owner came into the room and instantly broke into sobs when she saw that her cat was safe. Shaking all over, she reached into the crate and gently petted her as if the mother cat would shatter. Like its owner, the animal had clearly been badly abused, and I watched in awe at the powerful love between human and animal.

She explained, "I left my home a few days ago because after ten years of beating me, he finally turned on one of my three sons. That was enough and I wasn't going to allow that. But as we were leaving, he grabbed my pregnant cat and threatened to slit her open alive if we didn't stay. I had to choke back my tears and anger and just leave. I've lived the past two days thinking that I killed my precious cat."

A law enforcement officer present at the conference had overheard the woman's story and volunteered to go to the house to retrieve the cat. Luckily, the husband was passed-out drunk and the officer was able to get the cat and her newborn out safely.

Now her sobs were filled with relief for the safety of her cat and for a life of violence that was now over. As I gave her a hug, her final words to me were, "I will never have to go back now . . . I have all my loved ones with me."

Visiting the pet-friendly shelter in Naples and meeting this brave woman and her sweet cat reinforced the desperate need for a national

initiative to promote on-site housing of pets at domestic violence shelters. As of mid-2008, only six shelters in the country are known to allow women and children to bring their pets with them. That is a dismal reality, given that there are thousands of shelters across this country, most of which could make accommodations for pets.

With the release of the PAWS Program manual, an additional five shelters are now in the process of implementing PAWS. But it is still not enough for the women who know they have to leave an abusive home with their pets in order to stay safe and alive. Still today, their options are minimal.

Since PAWS was released to the public, women in jeopardy now reach out to me to locate their closest PAWS shelter. For many women, the shelters are too far away. One such phone call came in July 2008 from a woman in St. Louis, Missouri. She sounded frantic on the phone, spoke in broken speech, almost as if she was constantly looking over her shoulder and not able to focus on her words. She told me she had a 12-year-old dog that she needed to escape with and find shelter with. I broke the news that her closest shelter was over 500 miles away in Michigan.

I offered to find safe housing for her dog if she could get to her local domestic violence shelter, but she refused to be separated from her elderly dog. "He's all I have that still loves me in this world." She also did not have a car to drive to the closest shelter in Michigan. Before I could offer additional suggestions, her abuser connected to the call through another phone extension. After yelling and threatening the victim for over a minute, the call disconnected and I never heard from her again.

My latest assistance was for a woman named Tammy, a domestic violence survivor from the East Coast who left her abuser and found solace at a shelter. Unfortunately, she was not permitted to bring her two elderly cats. Tammy had a terrible decision to make; I could still

feel her guilt when she told me she'd have to leave them behind in order to stay alive. Tammy has now entered transitional housing—a stopgap between a shelter and independent housing. However, the transitional housing program will not allow her to have her cats, so together we are working to find housing where she can welcome her cats back into her life.

The phone calls and email messages pleading for help arrive almost daily now, and with each I have no choice but to give bad news to these women that their shelter does not recognize the need for them to have their pets.

I plan to change that. Some days, I am angry that pets are excluded as family members needing protection, when the research has documented that animal cruelty in the home often leads to additional and escalating violence against humans. On other days, I am filled with hope when a domestic violence shelter worker contacts me with interest in PAWS.

I will spend the rest of my working life helping anyone who needs a strong voice. Years ago, when I trained new prosecutors in Michigan, I always advised them: "If you have the prosecutor voice in your belly, you will survive the atrocities that you see and will be in this for life. If you do not have that little voice, you will stay for two years and then go to a law firm where you will make significantly more money. Now is the time to know whether you have that voice." I hear that little voice every day, and it keeps PAWS alive and expanding, slowly but surely, into a resource that will continue to help abused women make the decision to choose life, both for themselves and for their beloved pets.