

In Business Magazine, AUGUST 2012

Farm Therapy: Sanctuary rescues animals, heals humans



A weathered, gray barn sits on a hillside overlooking a spectacular valley in Verona. In the distance, two horses graze silently in stark contrast to the cacophony of animal calls inside the structure, where birds fly free, chickens cluck, and a large rooster, Ricardo, crows excitedly. Pigs snort, goats and lambs baa, and a huge tom turkey, Eddie, struts his stuff. This is Heartland Farm Sanctuary, the state's only dedicated farm animal rescue.

Dana Barre, 45, founder and executive director, is at home here among the chaos. "Good morning, sweetie," she says, greeting and cuddling Fonzi, a small black rooster, in her arms. Stroking his belly, she lulls the bird to sleep.

Heartland Farm Sanctuary is as much Barre's personal mission (in tribute to her mother) as it is a place of safety, peace, and therapy for both farm animals and people with special needs.

Animal attraction

Barre was a city girl from Waukesha, Wis., doing, she thought, everything according to society's prescribed plan. After graduating (UW-Madison/mathematics), she earned an MBA in risk management and enjoyed a 10-year career as an actuary. Still seeking her true passion, she took a hiatus to earn a second master's degree in community counseling. Sadly, her mother passed away soon after.

"My mother got me into this," she said of her decision to open Heartland. "She came from a very difficult early life. I always wanted to help her, take her pain away. I've grown up wanting to help people and

animals, and give voice to our most vulnerable."

Researching career alternatives, she spent time at the Dane County Humane Society and animal shelters, and quickly learned there was a lack of resources for farm animals, largely viewed as food in Wisconsin, where laws aren't always sympathetic. "I wanted to be the first to try [to care for them]," she said.

She started with one chicken coop and one stall for four animals. She knew nothing about animal care before acquiring four goats, so her learning curve was "very steep and hilarious." She researched more when adding two sheep, and so on. "Every different type of animal was a new experience," she said.

Animals in tow, she traveled to schools, nursing homes, and businesses, explaining her mission and drumming up financial and in-kind support. At an early fundraising event, a member of the Dane County Humane Society offered temporary use of her barn.

In 2010, Heartland Farm Sanctuary opened with six animals. Wisconsin, Barre explains, has 40 million farm animals (compared to 5 to 6 million cats and dogs). For every animal the organization now shelters, about 10 are turned away.

"Reality is pretty sad," she said. "As a new organization, we have to be careful not to overextend ourselves. We had to take in animals that were young or had a few medical needs, or animals that would easily integrate and socialize with other animals. Now that we're more secure, we can handle more difficult cases, but those also present a big financial burden."

After payroll, vet care is the nonprofit's second largest expense.

Heartland has about 50 animals on site, including llamas, two 400-pound pigs, and two horses. Each animal is named, has a published history on the website, and an opportunity for sponsorship. There are plenty of animal stories — like the time one of the big sows escaped from her stall overnight. She was later found in another locked stall at the opposite end of the barn. "She'd gone on a self-guided tour, evidently," Barre laughed, "and must have slid down the hay chute into the other stall. Our pigs are hilarious. They're so smart and fun."

Rescue magic

Although animal rescue was Barre's original intent when she launched the nonprofit, a much larger calling became obvious once she started witnessing firsthand the bonds that quickly formed between humans and animals. "A light bulb went on," she said. "It was magic. I knew then that we'd have to develop this program into something a large number of children could grow and benefit from."

Barre and her husband spent \$35,000 of their own money to launch Heartland, and for the first nine months, she was a one-woman show. Now, with a barn manager and assistant director on board, plus two paid animal caregivers and about 40 volunteers, she spends most of her time creating awareness and raising financial or in-kind support. "We take our financial health very seriously," Barre said. "We have to run like a for-profit company." She works about 60 hours a week for no salary.

"I hope I'll get paid one day," she admitted, "but there are so many other areas of Heartland that need the financial boost. Our workers need to get paid. I'm willing to wait."

Each day, animals are checked for signs of illness or distress that might have developed overnight and might require veterinary care. A significant challenge is keeping animals safe from nightly predators, such as raccoons and coyotes. Chickens are most vulnerable.

Last year, while nesting outside the barn, a female turkey was taken by a coyote. Her mate, Eddie, shut down. "Eddie grieved so deeply," Barre recalled. "He went into a corner of the barn, turned his head, and stayed there for six weeks. It seemed he wanted to die." (He's since bounced back.)

"We view our animals like most people view cats and dogs," she said. "Our goal is to improve the quality of their life as much as we can. We will give them a forever home if we can't find an appropriate placement for them."

In the afternoons, Barre usually meets with staff or trains volunteers. To cope with unseasonably extreme heat, she's emailing volunteers and looking for frozen gallon-jugs of water to help cool the animals. She's also finalizing preparations for Heartland's fundraising gala in August, which she hopes will raise \$40,000.

Making connections

Barre also has found other ways to generate revenue. The organization hosts summer day camps for kids, allowing them to help with barn chores and engage in hands-on animal care, socialization, and environmental education. On the therapeutic side of the business, licensed counselors provide animal-assisted therapy for special needs individuals who can interact with animals that, in many cases, have similar histories of abuse or neglect. "They can experience unconditional love in a safe environment, which helps the healing process for both humans and animals," Barre said. More than 500 children have visited and volunteered at Heartland, including about 150 kids with special needs.

This fall, Heartland will begin offering corporate retreats, and Barre is also working to establish the barn as a 2013-14 practicum site for UW-Madison's master's program in community counseling. "We have such a unique therapeutic environment to offer," she said, "and I want to develop a research program as well to study the human-animal connection."

Heartland Farm Sanctuary's 2011 operating budget of \$70,000 nearly doubled in 2012 to \$130,000, allowing for the purchase of the group's first Porta-Potty – a very welcome addition. Thanks to benevolent landowners, the organization [temporarily] gets to use the barn and surrounding pasture rent-free.

Barre wants to grow Heartland into a national therapeutic/rescue center that helps thousands of children, adults, and animals, and she aspires to be an international researcher studying the bond between humans and animals and the healing potential for both.

Glancing around the barn where chickens, ducks, goats, and Lola, a small pig, roam free, and volunteers – including a couple of young students – sweep floors, clean food dishes, and help wherever they can, tears come to Barre's eyes. "I'm doing what I was meant to do," she said. "I'm helping my mother. This is my life's work and it helps so many people. Besides my family, this is my reason for being. I have found my mission."

This article was posted in [August 2012](#).

Source: <http://www.ibmadison.com/In-Business-Madison/August-2012/Farm-Therapy-Sanctuary-rescues-animals-heals-humans/>