

Red Dog Farm to the Rescue

BY MIKE DAYTON

The Red Dog Farm Animal Rescue Network, established by Greensboro lawyer Garland Graham in 2006,

draws its name and inspiration from Graham's golden retriever. As of February 2010, the nonprofit organization had rescued a menagerie of animals—887 and counting, including 346 cats, 343 dogs, 74 goats, 43 chickens, 23 horses,

14 rabbits, seven miniature horses, seven ducks, seven sheep, six pigs, five donkeys, four cows, three alpacas, two ponies, one turtle, one parakeet, and one emu.



When she's not rescuing animals in need, Graham practices law with Schell Bray Aycock Abel & Livingston PLLC, focusing on mergers and acquisitions, lending and finance, and general corporate. Graham has managed to find the balance between her law practice and a thriving nonprofit.

Graham's younger years were a million miles from farm life. She grew up at a beach in Florida, where she played tennis and swam on the local swim team.

"I had never been around any farm animals like horses or goats," she says.

Graham moved to North Carolina after college to be near her future husband. She brought her beloved golden retriever with her and immediately got involved with a

golden retriever rescue group in the Greensboro area. Graham occasionally fostered other animals in search of a new home, and the word slowly got out.

"Somebody's daughter in college would find a stray dog, or somebody would find a litter of kittens in a parking lot, and they'd come find me," she says. "It was very informal, but we pretty much always had an extra dog or cat, or a litter of kittens in the house."

In 2003, Graham and her husband moved to his hometown of Summerfield, a small community about 12 miles north of Greensboro. They bought a house which adjoined a horse farm.

The couple's animal acquisition started innocently. Since there was more space on the

new property, it felt natural to continue fostering other dogs and cats, Graham says.

"I said, 'Let's get a couple of chickens,'" she says. "Then I picked up two stray dogs that I found beside the road as I was returning from a business law seminar. We ended up keeping one of those dogs."

Then came the farm animals.

"People began to call us and say, 'My granddad just died and he had two old goats and an old horse, where do I take them?'" Graham recalls. "I did a little research and discovered there really wasn't anywhere to take them."

The United States Equine Rescue League accepted horses when room was available, but that group would not take



Above—Garland Graham with Red Dog Rescue Farm's mascot, Tallulah LaMoo. Tallulah (who is meeting some of her adoring fans in the photo below) was surrendered last year after being rejected by her mother due to being born with a cleft palate.



Above—Recently, Garland introduced her foster goat, Bella, (who she is currently bottle-feeding after she was surrendered by a farmer because her mother rejected her) to a friend's horse.



other farm animals.

"So my answer became, 'Bring them to me and I'll see if I can find a home for them,'" Graham says.

That's how the first goats and horses appeared at the Grahams' home. Graham knew very little about horses, so she learned as much as she could from the Equine Rescue League. She also began riding nearly every weekend, and she then bought a colt, which quickly became part

of the expanding animal family.

"Then my husband bought a horse, because he figured out pretty quickly if he wanted to spend any quality time with me, he needed to start riding also," she says.

As the two fell in love with their horses, they became more concerned about the plight of other farm animals that could no longer be cared for or that were being neglected.

The Grahams suddenly found themselves with 18 animals, including two horses, two

donkeys, an old pony, four goats, a pig, and four dogs. They also realized they had already adopted out 50 animals.

"We saw that the number coming in was quickly exceeding the number going out—and vet bills and feeding costs were getting exorbitantly expensive," she says. "And frankly, we were just running out of space. There was a need for another foster organization because the local groups could not handle the load, and no one could handle farm animals such as goats."

The idea for a nonprofit group took root from those realities. Jennifer L.J. Koenig, a trust and estate lawyer at Graham's firm who also handled nonprofit work, told Graham, "You're running a nonprofit, but the difference is that you're paying for everything."



Nugget came to Red Dog Farm Rescue as a starvation case with four broken bones in his withers (shoulders). The photo to the left is from the day Nugget came to Red Dog (last September). "It breaks my heart to look at these now," Garland says.



You can see in the picture to the right where the veterinarian had to shave Nugget for surgery and his fur is now growing back in. According to Garland, "He is the sweetest horse ever!"



"It quickly took over our personal lives," Graham says. "With the organization outgrowing us, we needed to figure out a way to get our dining room back."

Thus began a search for inexpensive space where the organization could set up shop and adopters could come and meet volunteers and pick up animals.

In the summer of 2008, a Red Dog Farm volunteer saw the Guilford Sheriff's Department moving out of an old house it had been using as a substation in Bur-Mill Park. The park is a county-owned, city-operated facility on the north side of Greensboro. Within 48 hours, Red Dog Farm had signed a lease. The group has used the house as its headquarters since June 2008.

As Red Dog Farm expanded, Graham realized the nonprofit's day-to-day administration was outstripping her abilities to keep up.

"I was getting 30 to 40 e-mails a day and 50 calls a day," she says. "I was an attorney, and this is what I do for fun, but I can't do it all."

The group hired Lauren Riehle, who had been working with the Humane Society of the Piedmont, to help out three hours a day. Riehle's role was expanded to a full-time executive director by June 2009. Graham now handles the large animals, such as horses,

The time had come for an official organization. Graham sent out a letter to about 100 friends asking for their financial help in forming a nonprofit for animals of all sizes, with a special focus on farm animals.

"The response was overwhelming," she said. "We got pledges of well over \$10,000, and that gave us the boost of adrenaline we needed," she says.

By September 2006, Graham had formed a North Carolina nonprofit and also applied for and received 501(c)(3) status.

Red Dog Farm's first big investment—a website.

"We spent about \$2,000 of the money getting a website up and running," she says. "That seemed like a lot, but people told us you are only as good as your website. So we did that right."

The website allowed the group to post pictures and other updates of the foster animals coming in and being adopted by new families.

The group did not have a boarding facility, so instead it developed a patchwork of volunteers and foster homes, with the nonprofit covering all veterinary and food expenses. The nonprofit was run out of the Graham's home through the first half of 2008.

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while Riehle manages the group's small animal program.

Even with full-time help, the nonprofit was now consuming about half of Graham's time. Graham had made partner in her law firm in 2006, but the day came when she had to sit down with her managing partner and discuss her role in the firm.

"I felt like my firm was getting the raw end of the deal because I was out of the office a lot meeting with people about the nonprofit," she says. "I had a heart-to-heart with my managing partner and said I'd been here eight years. I loved the firm and wanted to stay but felt the nonprofit was cutting into some of the firm's time. I didn't feel right about it. I told him I could do both, but not on a full time basis."

The partnership worked out a plan, reducing her billable hour target and her compensation to a level where both parties were comfortable. They have been in that arrangement for two years.

"In December, when we're really busy at work, I must step back and be a full-time lawyer," she says.

The nonprofit is stable financially thanks to monthly fundraising events and several bigger fund raisers, including a dog fashion show, Dogs on the Catwalk, at a downtown theater.

Red Farm sends out a monthly e-letter and also mails a year-end letter to everyone who has adopted an animal or made a donation. This year, Red Farm sent out about 1,000 letters.

"The letter was short and sweet, saying this is where we are and what we've done in adopting out 1,000 animals," Graham says. "We included a pledge form and again raised about \$10,000."

Graham and her husband have now personally fostered more than 250 animals.

"Right now I have an extra horse and three goats living with me," she says.

Asked about success stories, Graham lists the very sick, emaciated, and mistreated animals that flourish once they come under Red Farm's care.

"When I first saw the horse Coco, I thought she would not make it back to our farm alive," Graham recalls. "She was just that sick and thin. But she gained 330

pounds in 10 weeks living with us. She ended up being a stunning mare and now has a good home in Apex."

Red Farm still does not have a central kennel. The group's long-range goal is a consolidated location where it can care for all of the animals.

"Having animals in multiple foster locations is pretty inefficient," Graham says, "especially for animals that need to be quarantined until we have their shots in order. So five years down the road is about when we will be in the throes of a capital campaign and a building phase to build Second Chance Ranch." ■

Mike Dayton is the content manager for Consultuwebs.com, a Raleigh-based web design and consulting company for law firms. He is the former editor of North Carolina Lawyers Weekly and South Carolina Lawyers Weekly and co-author of a book on the history of Wake County lawyers, published in 2004.

For additional information on Red Dog Farm Animal Rescue, please visit their website—www.reddogfarm.com.