

Telling Tail Tales

Tyler and Admiral the Goats,
Banksy the Sheep, and Ginger the Pig
By Sarina Fernandez-Grinshpun



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The bunny was contentedly sitting in the boy's lap, swaddled in the blanket. He carefully petted it while audibly whispering, "It's so soft." The joy he emanated, his infectious smile, the sun warming the animal refuge center like a blanket—all reasons for what makes volunteering such a source of happiness for me.

More recently, I was introduced to another bunny named Snowball. She had been abandoned, dumped over the fence. Animal Assisted Happiness, aka "The Smile Farm," where I have been a long-term volunteer, took her in to join 50 other rescued farm animals. She joined Ginger, the pot-bellied pig, and Eureka, the goat, among others. While volunteering at the site, I witnessed the comfort, peace, and giddiness these animals provide, and the reciprocation of unconditional love from the visitors.

Another wondrous thing about working with animals is that you have to earn their trust. For example, at AAH, there are three sheep that are extremely shy, and until recently, I could not get near them without them running away. After about 10 volunteer stints at AAH, I earned the trust of one of them enough for them to allow me to pet them! Having to work to get to know animals makes the connection that I have with them that much more special. Moreover, as I got to know animals, I started getting "animal best friends" or the animals that I had a deeper connection with. This does not mean that I gave them preferential treatment, but it means that I have certain animals that trust me more than others, and ones that I have spent more time with. For example, my "animal best friends" are Tyler and Admiral the goats, Banksy the sheep, and Ginger the pig. Although I still love to play with all of the animals, these animals are the ones that are more inclined to let me play with **them**.

Today I went to AAH for the first time since the shelter-in-place orders were issued. The pandemic made it difficult for me to continue to help animals outside of my own home but I was really excited to resume volunteering after so much time away. At AAH, they have two piglets that they rescued in February. I first saw them when they were just two weeks old. It was incredible to see them again today, and to see how much they had grown! Now I know what my parents mean when they say, "I can't believe how fast you are growing up!" It is amazing that I have the chance to see these piglets as they mature.

My passion for volunteering with rescue animals is contagious. Through the power of funny and compelling stories, I encouraged several friends and classmates to join me on volunteering adventures to AAH, as well as Elkus Ranch Environmental Education Center. Whether we were cleaning out animal stalls, brushing out baby goats, or painting benches outside, we were thrilled to be engaging with animals, in nature and in service.

Caring for rescues even happens at home. My family is lucky to have been adopted by two small rescue dogs, Chewy and Sunny. I relish taking care of, walking, and playing with them. Sunny was a stray before we adopted him. Chewy was a possible show dog but was rejected because of his different-colored eyes. They are both special needs dogs, with serious eye issues, but I learned how to administer their eye drops, and now they are part of our loving family. Chewy needs eye drops to help with his dry eyes, and Sunny has "cherry eye", which is caused by ligament weakness. In addition to the eye issues, Sunny turned out to be very aggressive toward larger, male, unneutered dogs. This led to dangerous situations and I was determined to help. After completing a course on managing aggression in dogs, I was able to train away Sunny's aggressive tendencies and now we both enjoy neighborhood walks more!

In many ways, working with rescues has helped me gain some fundamental understandings: all living things crave and deserve unconditional love; every animal is worthy of shelter; volunteering brings people together; nature enlivens us all; and the more you give, the more you receive in return. Volunteering to help take care of abandoned animals has given me so much joy because I feel as though I am protecting them when others have shunned them. I wish more people considered rescuing animals instead of going through a breeder. So many animals are neglected and abandoned, and many are euthanized because of human vanity and lack of commitment. Inclusivity is important to me and being able to both defend animals and bring others in makes me feel like I am constructing a loving community of nurtured people and animals that will only grow.

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