



Shelter from the Storm

In 1997, Terry Cummings and Dave Hoerauf welcomed their first animal, a pig named Petunia, to Poplar Spring Animal Sanctuary in Poolesville. Since then, they have cared for thousands of animals who had been neglected, abused or abandoned.

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN | PHOTOS BY GASTON LACOMBE



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TERRY CUMMINGS AND Dave Hoerauf, once high school sweethearts in Hyattsville, rented a Colonial-era farmhouse in Poolesville in 1987, expecting to leave in a year. She was working as a veterinary technician at the National Zoo; he had a job in printing. The couple knew a farmer was renting the land around their house, and before long they had fallen in love with his Angus cows and steers. They watched their babies grow and delighted in waking up to “moos.”

Cummings was folding laundry in the house one day when she heard the cows and steers crying and people yelling. From her bedroom window she saw men beating the bovines with baseball bats, forcing them into a truck, babies abandoned.

Cummings says it never occurred to her that the animals they’d named and fed apples were being raised for slaughter. In that moment, everything changed. She and Hoerauf learned that farm animals are exempt from animal cruelty laws, and over the next several years the couple became vegans and decided—after a lot of discussions—to start an animal sanctuary on the property. They had the blessing of the landowner, who had evicted the cattle farmer.

“We didn’t just jump in feet first,” Hoerauf says to a visitor one day this spring, walking through the goat barn. Once you start a forever home like this, he says, you can’t stop. “It’s a lifetime commitment. But we don’t ever feel like we made a mistake. Right, Zachary?” he says, petting a white goat.

Losing their lease was among the couple’s early worries. But the landowner donated the entire property of 430 acres to Cummings and Hoerauf a decade ago. Today, the couple—both 57, married 32 years and without





Clockwise from above:
Mikey the steer; Dave
Hoerauf and Terry Cum-
mings, owners of Poplar
Spring Animal Sanctuary;
Dar Veverka (right) and
Malita Kim-Schultz with
Missy, an elderly, arthritic
pig



children—can keep their promise to the 300 animals that they will always have a home there.

“I have the best job in the world,” Cummings says. “It’s exhausting, time-consuming, and we haven’t had a weekend off in 20 years. But I can’t think of anything I’d like more than seeing these animals alive and having a great life because of what we’re doing.”

CAROLE SUTTON BEGAN volunteering at Poplar Spring in 2007, shortly after she retired as a Montgomery County teacher. Cummings and Hoerauf hired her within weeks. She is one of eight staff members.

“There’s always something going on here, either gut-wrenching or euphoric,” says Sutton, 72, adding that the work makes her feel much younger. While it’s heartbreaking to see animals arrive injured or emaciated, she says, knowing they have a life ahead of them is pure magic. “It’s brought me to a level of compassion and a place I didn’t even know my heart could go.”

Each animal has a name and distinct personality, and a few unlikely friendships have formed. There’s Josie, a blind Barbados Blackbelly sheep, and Evie, a three-legged Nigerian Dwarf goat, who have become besties. And visitors are tickled when they see how Nicky, a male pigeon, and Stevie, a Silkie hen, pine for each other when separated. They share a tiny house with a fan and heater, and soft cooing resonates from behind closed doors. “Nicky loves Stevie,” Hoerauf says. “You can’t stop love. It’s real.”

Every resident also has a story. Ferdinand the goat was found in a Southeast Washington apartment. A goat named Sebastian was rescued from a hoarder who had two dead goats in his closet. Chester the black sheep was found running loose in Rock Creek Park. Marshall, a white sheep, was found grazing on Interstate 270 and eventually lured into a trailer by some clever humans and an ewe in heat. Two pigs arrived from a testing laboratory. Malcolm, the head goat, was found as a baby on the median strip of I-95.

This spring, Poplar Spring adopted its first alpacas from a farm starvation case in Pennsylvania. Griffin and Spencer hum (as alpacas



Clockwise from above: Volunteer Maureen McGowan and some hungry sheep; Carole Sutton and Bella, the bunny; alpacas Griffin and Spencer; Malcolm, the goat; owner Dave Hoerauf and his sheep







do), run like the wind and still withdraw fearfully when humans approach.

With each saved life comes an eventual death. After an animal dies, a necropsy is performed and the animal's ashes are buried at the farm. In December, a Longhorn cross steer named Mini Moo died in his sleep of heart and liver failure, and each cow came up to say goodbye, mooing quietly. Later in the winter a social, tail-wagging sheep named Adam died in hospice in the farmhouse. In April, an arthritic, half-blind rooster named Sydney died, leaving an equally arthritic girlfriend, Cleo, in mourning. The farm's oldest animal is a 42-year-old mule named Gloria.

"Losing animals is so sad," Sutton says. "But I've learned to personally say to myself, 'This animal had the best chance at life.'" The sanctuary is not just for animals, she adds. "It's for those of us who feel so deeply."

SAVING LIVES COMES AT a price. Cummings and Hoerauf are limited in the number of animals they welcome onto the farm by their funding, which comes completely from donations. They field requests daily for help in placing animals, and while they can't bring them all to the sanctuary, they have networked with other groups to help find homes for

Clockwise from above: A pig and a bull greet each other; Hoerauf introduces a rooster to visiting children; visitors feed a goat.



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Poplar Spring Animal Sanctuary welcomes visitors, who can take tours and see a variety of farm animals up close.

hundreds of animals over the years.

The sad truth of life after neglect or abuse, no matter what the species, is that special—and expensive—care is often needed. Take Georgie, a lamb born on a West Virginia farm this spring with front legs so twisted and bent that he couldn't stand up to nurse. After surgery at the University of Pennsylvania's New Bolton Center Hospital for Large Animals, he returned to Poplar Spring with one leg in a cast and one in a splint, and would soon learn how to walk. Cummings drives three hours each way to New Bolton when animals need treatment, whether it's a 950-pound pig with a bone infection or a goat with gallstones. In Georgie's case, treatment cost about \$2,000. But he unexpectedly died of an infection shortly after he returned to the farm.

“WHEN YOU CAN PUT a name, face and personality on your food, it changes your perspective,” says Maureen McGowan,

who lives in Gaithersburg and has volunteered at Poplar Spring for four years. McGowan had retired from the Department of Homeland Security, and one year into volunteering she converted from meat-eater to vegan. Today, as one of 100 regular volunteers, she helps with animal care and manages the Facebook page for Wee Wee, a celebrity pig who was a 2-week-old piglet when he was found freezing on the side of the road during Snowzilla in 2016. McGowan is also known as the treat lady and can be found tossing pieces of sliced bread to joyfully jumping geese. When McGowan drives down the dirt road to the farm, her favorite resident, pygmy goat Zachary, watches her silver SUV and starts crying with anticipation.

Part of the sanctuary's mission is to promote compassion and humane treatment of all animals by educating the public. Cummings and Hoerauf regularly give tours to school and community groups and talk about the lives of

animals raised for human food. Visitors pet sheep, hold chickens and feed goats.

“You hope it changes people the way it changed us,” Cummings says. “The pigs are like dogs. You're trying to clean the barn, and the pig wants to get his belly rubbed.” These bellies, by the way, are enormous. Pigs are generally slaughtered at 5 months, or 250 pounds. When they are allowed to live, they can reach 1,000 pounds by age 6.

At the end of the day, the animals are called to their barns. “C'mon sheepies!” “Chick-chick-chick-chick!” But the fail-safe way to get everyone running home, Hoerauf says, is to offer dessert. On a warm afternoon this spring he stood outside the sheep barn and shook a plastic jug from Sam's Club that was filled—of course—with animal crackers. “It works every time,” he says. ■

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