

President of Humane Society Silicon Valley  
and Founder of Mutual Rescue™

CAROL NOVELLO

*with* Ginny Graves



# Mutual Rescue

How adopting a homeless  
animal can save you, too

“Adopting a pet can greatly benefit the lives of people who are emotionally hurting. Read these heart-warming stories in *Mutual Rescue*.”

—TEMPLE GRANDIN, PhD, author of *Animals in Translation* and *Animals Make Us Human*

“Through authentic accounts, scientific evidence, and personal narrative, Carol Novello illustrates how when we rescue a homeless animal, we ourselves are so often rescued right back! This book is destined to save lives.”

—MARTY BECKER, DVM, and JACK CANFIELD,  
#1 New York Times bestselling co-authors of  
*Chicken Soup for the Pet Lover’s Soul*

“Packed with heartrending stories of struggling people who have adopted homeless animals, this fascinating book reveals the many unrecognized ways dogs and cats can ground us, provide a sense of purpose, and give us the strength to move forward. Part science, part story, *Mutual Rescue* is all heart. It made me cry and filled me with hope for our planet and every person on it.”

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“I love Mutual Rescue’s films, so when I heard about this new book, I raced to read it. The stories about rescued pets rescuing people were like rays of bright sunshine on a stormy afternoon. Truly an awe-inspiring book!”

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“*Mutual Rescue* juxtaposes authentic stories and scientific thought about the animal-human bond. It touches hearts, opens minds, and inspires compassion—a life-changing book.”

—BRIAN HARE, founder of Duke Canine Cognition Center and New York Times bestselling author of *The Genius of Dogs*

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How Adopting a  
Homeless Animal  
Can Save You, Too

Carol Novello

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# Introduction

From my office at Humane Society Silicon Valley, I look out on a small plot of land dotted with bushes that we call the Community Cat Garden. Inside the fenced space, undomesticated cats, or Carol's Ferals, as my co-workers call them, live until we can find safe homes for them in a barn or garden nursery. These creatures tend to hole up in their condos, like Floridian retirees, emerging predictably at dusk, when their dark profiles are hard to distinguish from the lengthening shadows. My German shepherd rescue, Tess, and I often stare out the window, both hoping to catch a glimpse of one of these reclusive creatures that exist in the netherworld between the average coddled housecat and their large, predatory ancestors who are sometimes sighted in the nearby California hills. The untamed cats' Garbo-esque nature (they "want to be left alone") is fascinating partly because it stands in stark contrast to most of the pets I've had over the years, who craved my company and care. But they bring to mind another feline from my long-ago past, whose appearance was formative and set the stage for some of the most meaningful decisions I've ever made.

It was the holidays, and my parents and I were shopping at a Christmas tree farm near our home in the Philadelphia suburbs. I was five. The frigid air, alive with the scent of spruce and the tingly anticipation of the season, heightened my sense of purpose: I would find our family the perfect tree. I was eyeing a promising specimen when a slinky shape emerged from beneath its branches. A cat! He walked up to me, and when I knelt down to pet him, his pale amber

fur felt like flimsy protection from the cold. He head-butted my knee and began to purr. “Why is he here?” I asked my mom, already smitten. “Do you think he has a home? If he’s on his own, can we keep him? *Please???*”

“I’ll find out,” she said. As I watched her walk away to talk to the farm’s owner, my heart was caught in a tug-of-war between hope and disappointment. Based on my five years of experience, the latter appeared far more likely. In our family constellation, my dad and I rotated easily in the same orbit, but my mother always seemed more remote and unreachable. I understood that she loved me in her own way, but it didn’t feel the same as it did with my father, whose companionship was like a cozy fire. Warm. Welcoming. Safe. And that’s one reason this moment remains firmly rooted in my memory. When my mom returned, she was smiling. “Someone dumped the cat here, so we can keep him,” she announced. I was thrilled—and dumbstruck. My mother had said *yes*. More than that, she felt the same tenderness toward this stray that I did. Animals were the crack in her shield that allowed a glimmer of love to break through—a space that enabled her to feel and express love. And, now, miraculously, here she was, after we chose a tree, saying, “Well, come on, Carol, let’s get the cat in the car before he freezes to death.” For the first time in my young life, I sensed that we might be able to connect. Animals might bridge the divide.

Together, we went to the supermarket and bought our new family member a flounder, which we gift-wrapped and placed under the tree on Christmas morning. All three of us laughed as we watched Nicholas Quattromano (named after St. Nicholas and “four hands” in Italian, a nod to my father’s heritage) sniff out his present and shred the paper to uncover—and devour—the fish. Not surprisingly, his rescue ignited my passion for adopting homeless creatures. Rescuing Nick, as we called him, created a way for my mom and me to share the same world. It didn’t fix our relationship. But it allowed me to glimpse her softer, more kindhearted side and revealed that we shared something in common.

Even though Nick's initial tentative friendliness turned out to be a calculated gambit to get us to bring him in from the cold—thereafter, he spent the majority of his time atop the refrigerator, safely out of reach of my grasping, cuddling arms—I felt happy that he had a safe home, that he was ours, and that he could depend on us. The seed of my passion for rescuing homeless animals was planted.

Nick was the first of many strays we welcomed into our home over the coming years. His rescue laid the initial stone in my meandering path that led from Harvard Business School to a decade with high-tech software producer Intuit—which set off a search for greater meaning and eventually steered me toward the work I do today as president of our bustling shelter in the heart of Silicon Valley.

Given my lifelong love of animals, accepting the job at Humane Society Silicon Valley was, in my mind, a *fait accompli*. But not everyone saw it that way. Some former colleagues and casual acquaintances, as well as people I met as I began raising money for the organization, didn't understand why someone who had an MBA from Harvard and had run multi-million-dollar businesses for Intuit would veer into animal welfare; others could relate to the impulse to do something philanthropic but didn't get why I wasn't trying to alleviate *human* suffering. Ultimately, they all asked similar versions of the same question: "Why are you helping animals when you could be helping people?"

In response, I'd quote the statistics that spurred my passion for animal welfare: While great strides have been made in saving animals' lives in the United States, more than 6.5 million cats and dogs still enter animal shelters each year—and 1.5 million are euthanized. And of the roughly \$410 billion that Americans give to charities, only 3 percent goes to animal-related and environmental causes *combined*. People nodded their heads, and many expressed genuine concern, but I could tell that most weren't fully persuaded. I began to sense that those heartbreaking statistics were only part of the story—that I was missing a deeper truth.



As I groped for a fuller explanation, I started thinking about my mother and how Nick had been the saving grace of our relationship. The tenderness I saw her express toward the creatures that populated our lives showed me she was capable of love, even if she wasn't always able to express it to me in the way I longed for. I still felt saddened by our relationship, but somewhere along the way I realized I could either be resentful and angry for what she didn't give me or grateful for what she did: a devotion to animals that led to my life's purpose. I chose the latter. As I thought more about what animals have meant in my life—how they've given me hope when I was despondent, laughter when I was stressed, companionship when I was lonely—as well as the lives of nearly every pet owner I know, I finally saw it—the hidden “why” of animal rescue: By helping animals I *am* helping people—helping them heal their own pain, find greater purpose, and discover more sources of joy.

The human race is definitely in need of help. The magnitude of misery, even in our prosperous country, is mind-boggling. Sixteen million adults in the United States struggle with depression. About 8 million adults in any given year have post-traumatic stress disorder. Twenty-nine million are diagnosed with diabetes, and an estimated 8 million have it but don't yet know it. Meanwhile, nearly 40 percent of people are obese. And that's not counting the grieving, heartbroken, sedentary masses who may not be diagnosable but are struggling and hurting nonetheless. But there's hope for a healthier future, and what leads us toward it may very well have four legs and a tail. Companion animals can help relieve a range of troubles—and as I and my writing collaborator, Ginny Graves, explain in the chapters ahead, there's scientific research that proves it. The data affirming animals' positive effects on human health is so persuasive that 60 percent of doctors in a recent survey said they prescribe pet adoption, and a staggering 97 percent believe pet ownership provides health benefits. While this research is applicable to animals in general—regardless of whether they were rescued or not—giving a shelter animal a home confers a special kind of restorative grace.

Naturally, I'm biased toward encouraging people to adopt shelter pets. But I believe that showing benevolence for a homeless creature fertilizes the seeds of kindness, generosity, and compassion that exist inside us, spurring those qualities to put down roots and thrive. It grounds us in love.

People facing serious challenges often benefit profoundly from adopting an animal, but pets can enrich *anyone's* busy life. They also come with their share of demands and headaches, of course, as anyone who has stepped in warm dog barf at four a.m. can testify. But caring for another creature, and having someone who depends on you, can be its own kind of blessing, adding dimension and meaning to the daily routine. And beyond the hassles, most people who adopt an animal find so much reward.

Cats and dogs inject contentment, warmth, and goofy little hits of delight into our days that distract us from our worries, keep us grounded in the here and now, and remind us what matters—including the fact that a grubby tennis ball or ratty ball of yarn can be a source of real joy. My cat, Wilbur, a master prankster whom I adopted when I was thirty, revealed the wonder of kitchen drawers. He would pull out a bottom drawer, crawl behind it, claw his way up the rear of the cabinet, and emerge out the top drawer, like Houdini popping to the surface after being shackled in an underwater crate. Wilbur would look at me like, “*Ta-da! Pretty cool, huh?*” It never failed to make me laugh—and ease the stress of work. Wilbur was an antidepressant and anxiety cure in a single furry package.

In studies with a variety of types of people, the same story emerges. Interacting with an animal can lift mood, increase well-being, and facilitate the ability to communicate and connect. Given the rampant ill health, emotional and physical, in our culture, that's actually a profoundly hopeful, and radically important, finding. After accepting my role at Humane Society Silicon Valley, I began finding evidence of the life-changing impact of pets everywhere, and the more stories I heard about people who'd regained their vitality and flourished after adopting a cat or dog, the more urgently

I felt the need to share them. People needed to know that rescuing an animal doesn't mean ignoring humanity's woes; it's a vital part of the solution!

In 2015, a board member introduced me to David Whitman, a storyteller and creative producer, who helped me come up with a way to spread the word about the transformative power of adopting an animal. He coined the phrase “mutual rescue” and suggested we make short films of people whose lives have been dramatically bettered by rescuing an animal. As it happened, I had the perfect candidate already in mind. About a year before, we had received a letter from an obese man who told us he'd become vastly healthier after adopting an overweight dog from our shelter. We made his journey the subject of our first film, hoping it would reach enough people to inspire others across the country to submit their own stories for consideration and encourage people to adopt shelter animals. We had no idea what we were in for. *Eric & Peety*, that first short film, caught fire and has now been viewed more than 100 million times in more than forty countries.

We were *flooded* with story submissions from people who'd been depressed, suicidal, diabetic, broken, homeless, lonely, and more—all of whom had moving, uplifting stories about how their rescue pets had saved them. We turned four of their redemptive stories into short films—and watched this international phenomenon flourish. *Kylie & Liza*, our second film, released in early 2017, tells the story of an effervescent twelve-year-old girl battling lethal bone cancer and the kitten she adopts, who, after her death, became a vital source of solace for her grieving mom. We released three more films later that year, and collectively those four films have garnered more than 35 million views to date.

The films struck a chord because they depict the essence of mutual rescue. But as we dug deeper into our trove of anecdotes, I realized the full story of what happens when a human adopts an animal can't be told in a five-minute film. One of the truly astonishing aspects of this phenomenon is that the uplifting effect often spreads *beyond* the

person who adopts a stray. Take my experience with Wilbur and his feline brother, Wiley, who was a total love bug with his own sweet charisma. By buoying me up and bolstering my resilience, those two helped me be a more genial and compassionate leader at work, which created a collaborative environment that allowed my team to feel more empowered and function more effectively. In other words, two goofball cats helped set off a mini upward spiral of positive energy. And that's just one small example of something that happens routinely when a person rescues an animal: The meaningful bond humans often form with their pets can foster a deep sense of well-being that allows them to embrace life and love more fully, and they may inspire others to do the same.

A Harvard study tracking the lives of 238 men since 1938 has found that close relationships, more than money or success, are what make us happy. George Vaillant, who led the study from 1972 to 2004, wrote that there are two pillars of this deep and enduring happiness: “One is love,” he says. “The other is finding a way of coping with life that does not push love away.” Rescue animals are a coping mechanism that *draws love in*—increasing the odds that we can *radiate love out*. And when one person becomes more upbeat, the feeling can spread to others, according to a separate group of Harvard researchers. Their fascinating studies revealed that having a happy friend who lives within a mile increases the probability that you will be happy, too—and that bliss often spreads to neighbors, nearby siblings, and spouses. In other words, the joy one person generates from adopting an animal can be contagious.

I've come to think of this phenomenon as the “rescue effect,” because adopting an animal can create ripples of well-being that impact concentric circles of people—sometimes even total strangers. The idea was inspired by “the butterfly effect,” a scientific phenomenon that shows, in essence, that the flap of a butterfly's wings in Australia can set enough molecules of air in motion to create a tornado in Kansas. Put simply: Small changes can have surprisingly large consequences.

In the following chapters, we reveal the countless ways this plays out in real people's lives. We start with the Heart section, where you'll meet people whose rescue animals have helped them face inconceivable trauma and grief and provided the strength, courage, and wisdom they needed to find their way forward. In the Body section, we share stories of people who've learned that adopting a cat or dog can not only help them become healthier but also help them cope with and recover from physical illnesses and injuries and show them how to thrive in spite of their disabilities—and experience more joy. In Mind, you'll see how rescue animals can actually save people coping with anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), offering them hope, helping them create healthier patterns of thought, and leading them toward lives filled with meaning and compassion. But nearly every story has all three elements—heart, mind, *and* body—a graphic demonstration of the expansive and multifaceted impact of rescuing an animal. And people in these narratives aren't the only ones who benefit; the animals do, too, in ways that are surprising, tender, and sometimes profound.

Finally, in Connection, we reveal how pets can strengthen our relationships with the people we love, how we can bond deeply with many types of animals, not just cats and dogs, and how, when rescue pets make people healthier and happier, something remarkable can happen: Their hearts mended, these humans often go on to make positive contributions to the world and pay forward the love and healing they received. Some find a deeper sense of purpose, others develop a stronger understanding of who they are and why they're here, and some even discover a renewed sense of their own personal faith or relationship with something divine, however they define it.

The stories and research in this book reveal what I know to be true: Rescue pets can help us evolve as people, because they give us a safe way to practice opening our hearts, and once we learn how to be more open and empathetic with pets, we can become more compassionate with ourselves, better at being tender with others—and more inspired to contribute to humanity.

Animals can bring us face-to-face with both our flaws and our deeper potential. They can train us to be more reliable and responsible. They can help us overcome our shortcomings and set us on the road to becoming our *best* selves—loving, nurturing, caring, giving. And by presenting us with the opportunity to learn and grow, they offer us the chance to become a source of light and hope for humankind. As we teach them to heel, they show us how to *heal*.

SECTION I



# HEART

# I

## Finding Courage

### *Pets as Secure Bases and Safe Havens*

On the morning of February 28, 2018, Grace Briden's mom drove her and her sister to high school, as usual. But that was the only thing ordinary about the day. Grace was a sophomore at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, and two weeks before, one teacher, two coaches, and fourteen of her classmates, including one of Grace's friends, had been shot and killed at the school. During the ordeal, Grace had hidden in a classroom with thirty other students for three and a half hours, crying and praying, not knowing where the gunman was, if her sister was safe, or if any of them would make it out of the school alive. Ever since, she'd been plagued by flashbacks and nightmares of hunkering down in that room, of her friends sobbing, and of the paralyzing fear she felt while waiting to see if they were going to live or die. "I never wanted to set foot in that school again. I was sure I'd have a panic attack if I went on campus. I didn't know if I could get through it," she says.

Even so, there she was, making her way through the throng of media, heavily armed police officers, well-wishers, and parents on the first day Stoneman Douglas reopened. The fence was adorned with flowers, cards, candles, and memorials. The crowd cheered as



the students walked in. “I know they were trying to be supportive, but I didn’t like the fanfare,” she says. “I was super anxious, because I thought there might be another shooting.”

While Grace was outside braving the crowd, inside the school, Marni Bellavia, a dog trainer and manager of the Animal Assisted Therapy program at Humane Society of Broward County, was awaiting the students’ arrival near the roped-off building where the shooting occurred. She’d brought her mini-Australian shepherd rescue, Karma, a trained therapy dog, as well as her team of twenty volunteers and their therapy dogs, all rescues, to comfort the students. Six years before, Karma, just a one-year-old puppy, had been found wandering the streets in a small town in Mississippi. She was dangerously overweight but sweet and friendly. When her rescuers called the number on her tag, her owners said they didn’t want her back. The local shelter sent Karma to Humane Society of Broward County—facilities often handle overpopulation by transferring animals to locations with higher demand—where Marni adopted her. By the time Karma was two, she was certified as a therapy animal. She’d worked with the elderly, kids with autism, and people with traumatic brain injuries, but, prior to the Stoneman Douglas shooting, she’d never comforted trauma victims. “I knew she’d do great,” Marni says. “She’s extraordinarily attentive to people, loves to give and receive affection, and has an innate sense of who needs her the most.”

As Grace approached the building where the shooting occurred, tears began welling in her eyes, and she wanted nothing more than to turn around and go home. “My friends were saying don’t look over there,” she says. “Then out of the corner of my eye, I saw Karma. She was so adorable I ran up to her and started petting her. She snuggled into me, and something changed inside me. Ever since the shooting, I’d been depressed. My heart felt so heavy. But Karma lifted my heart. She broke through the sadness and gave me something good to focus on. And she didn’t just say hi and walk away, like dogs sometimes do. She stayed with me. She licked my hand.

She let me pet her. She gave me the chance to calm down. I don't know if she knew how much comfort I felt. But she gave me the courage to get through the day.”

From then on, Grace sought out Karma and the other therapy dogs every chance she got. “I talked to therapists, but the dogs were the only reason I was able to go to school. The shooting changed me. I didn't think I'd ever smile or be happy again. But the dogs' attention and love made me see there was still good in the world. They were the key to helping me come back to my new self,” she says.

Like Grace, sixteen-year-old Jonathan Sullivan dreaded going back to Stoneman Douglas. He had been in his fourth period ceramics class when the fire alarm went off on February fourteenth, the day of the shooting. As his class filed outside, word began to spread that there was a shooter in the freshman building. “I saw a Snapchat video of a kid huddled on the floor of a classroom, with the sound of gunshots in the background, and I just started running,” says Jonathan.

He scrambled over a nearby chain-link fence, then ran toward the apartment where he and his dad, Joe, lived, about a quarter mile from the school. The streets were already jammed with empty cars, abandoned by desperate parents trying to get to their kids, and hundreds of uniformed officers carrying guns. “It felt like a war zone,” says Jonathan. When he reached the roundabout near their home, his dad, frantic with worry, was there waiting. “I just kept thinking, ‘Let Johnny be okay,’” recalls Joe. “Seeing him was the happiest moment of my life. We hugged each other, and I said, ‘Let's go home.’”

But the young man who had left home that morning wasn't the same one who shuffled into their apartment that afternoon. “Every time I closed my eyes to go to sleep, the day of the shooting would start running through my mind,” says Jonathan. “I'd put myself in the shoes of the kids who got shot. I couldn't get those thoughts out of my head, so I wasn't able to sleep.” Jonathan was withdrawn, too. Even Joe couldn't reach him. “I've been a single dad since Johnny

was three, and we've always been really close," says Joe. "But he was just sort of lost. I couldn't blame him. I'm an adult, and I didn't know how to cope with this kind of tragedy."

When Jonathan got home from that first day back at school, however, Joe noticed a change. "All he talked about was the comfort dogs," Joe says. "After the second day, he came home and said, 'I think I need a dog.'"

That night, Joe called 100+ Abandoned Dogs of Everglades Florida Rescue and learned there was a litter of puppies at a foster home not far from his apartment. Several weeks before, a police officer had found the flea-infested puppies in the backyard of a home in Miami. The puppies' parents were chained in the yard, and their stomachs were swollen nearly to the point of bursting, after being fed a diet of raw beans and rice. The officer took the litter to the rescue group, who nursed them back to health.

"Johnny and I went to see them, and one puppy just rolled over and wanted belly rubs. We fell in love with him," says Joe. "The rescue organization waived the fees and gave us dog food. I will always be grateful for their generosity and how sensitive they were to Johnny's situation."

Jonathan named his new puppy Ajax. "He was friendly and loving and so excited to see me every day. Just knowing that he'd be waiting for me when I came home from school made me feel better," he says. "Friends and classmates came over every day so they could hang out with Ajax, too. When we were sitting around playing with the dog, kids would start opening up about what happened. Ajax softened the atmosphere and made us all feel okay about talking about stuff. He helped lots of kids feel better."

Joe was astonished by the effect the puppy had on his son. "Johnny went from not sleeping and not wanting to talk about anything to communicating again and feeling more like his old self," he says. "This was a puppy, not some trained service dog, but he always seemed to know just what we needed. I don't know how we would have made it through that time without Ajax."

The puppy, Jonathan says, made them feel safe. “Not that Ajax is a guard dog. Far from it. But with him by my side, I was able to sleep. And knowing that he was relying on me helped me feel stronger,” Jonathan says, adding, “I used to hear about school shootings and wonder what that would be like. Now I know. It’s even worse than you think. It messes you up. But Ajax and I developed this bond. Being with him made me feel like I could handle life again.”

### *Cats and Dogs Can Enlarge Our Capacity for Courage*

By the time of the Parkland shooting, I’d been collecting stories of people who’d been saved by rescue pets for several years. I’d heard hundreds of stories that inspired me and moved me to tears, and I was overwhelmed by the diverse and often miraculous ways rescuing an animal can save a person, too. But hearing about Grace and Jonathan left me short of breath.

I’ve faced heartbreak and lost loved ones I miss to this day. But I couldn’t imagine what it would feel like to endure such a needless tragedy, nor could I conceive of the courage it must have taken the students—much less the families in Parkland who lost daughters and sons and loved ones—to move forward in its aftermath. It made me think of the definition of courage from Brené Brown, author and research professor at the University of Houston’s Graduate College of Social Work: “Courage is a heart word. The root of the word courage is *cor*—the Latin word for heart. In one of its earliest forms, the word courage meant ‘To speak one’s mind by telling all one’s heart.’ Over time, this definition has changed, and today, we typically associate courage with heroic and brave deeds. But in my opinion, this definition fails to recognize the inner strength and level of commitment required for us to actually speak honestly and openly about who we are and about our experience good and bad. Speaking from our hearts is what I think of as ‘ordinary courage.’”

In the aftermath of the shooting, Grace and Jonathan needed both bravery and ordinary courage—bravery to show up for school

every day and ordinary courage to open up and cope with what had happened. And the humans involved weren't the only ones whose circumstances required mettle. Imagine the stoutness of heart Karma and Ajax, neglected and abandoned, would've had to call upon to survive. When their rescuers delivered them to the safety of their respective shelters, they actually saved numerous lives. Meeting Karma was pivotal for Grace's healing—and untold numbers of others as well. And adopting Ajax was the choice that shored up Jonathan's nerve and allowed both him and Joe to face the horror of what had happened and brave whatever came next.

And it's not just dogs that can give traumatized people strength. Nichole Stone, twenty-five, of Salem, Oregon, was at the Las Vegas Route 91 Harvest music festival in September 2017, when a gunman opened fire on the crowd. "I'm not sure what would have happened to me afterward if it hadn't been for my cat, Connor," she says. When she'd adopted him as a kitten in June 2014 from Best Friends Animal Society in Mission Hills, California, he was scrawny and tiny, with a crooked tail and disheveled fur. "He licked my face and I knew he was the one," she says. After the shooting, Connor seemed to sense that Nichole needed extra attention. "I'd wake up from a dream about the shooting that was so real it felt like I was there all over again. Connor would lick my face and remind me I was home and safe. I have a lot of guilt since the concert. Why am I still here when fifty-eight people didn't come home that weekend? But I can't let that break me, because I can't leave my little beast. He's given me the strength to get through it."

The circumstances of Grace's, Jonathan's, and Nichole's experiences were extraordinary. But we all come up against challenges that require us to take a stand or speak up or summon a firm sense of resolve, and the support we get from loved ones can steel us to face down trials large and small. If our human network frays or falls short, however—or we fail to reach out for help—we can become isolated. Alone, our worry-prone minds, which evolved over millennia to scan for threats, can fall prey to anxiety, depression, anger,

fear, and insecurity. At those dark and withdrawn times, our kinship with pets can be the bedrock that anchors us and helps us move fearlessly forward.

### *How Bonding With Our Pets Helps Us Be Brave*

In my years at Humane Society Silicon Valley, I've been fortunate to witness remarkable examples of human-animal synergy a number of times, but after hearing Nichole's and the Stoneman Douglas students' stories I needed to know: *How* does that type of mutual rescue happen? Why did interacting with animals help Grace, Jonathan, and Nichole feel brave? What do pets do for us that amplifies our capacity for courage?

The simplest answer is the one we all think of first: unconditional love. Whether the creature curled up at your feet is a regal Persian you fell for at your local shelter or a wounded pit bull found wandering the streets, you already know that rescue animals can serve as an unwavering source of affection—and being loved is a source of power. But love is only part of the story. As you'll read below, research shows that something deeper and less well recognized happens when we bring a pet into our home, and it stems not just from what we get from our animals but from what we become capable of *giving* when we experience the safety and security their love provides. Our rescue pets' affection can mobilize our strength; our love for them helps us turn our minds from fear to fortitude, so we're staunch enough to be a source of strength, not only for ourselves but for others, too.

At Austria's esteemed Wolf Science Center, Kurt Kotrschal, a biologist, and his colleagues (which include nearly twenty timber wolves and fifteen mutts rescued from Hungarian animal shelters) have spent the past decade delving into the thriving research area of human-animal attachment, trying to tease apart the behavioral nuances and biological underpinnings of our mysterious ability to love creatures of different species. When we caught up with

Kotrschal, who is also a professor in the department of behavioral biology at the University of Vienna, he explained over the phone that in order to grasp the full impact of our relationships with pets, we first need to understand how we bond with people—and the place to start is with attachment theory, a psychological concept developed in the 1970s to describe the most fundamental of our evolutionary relationships: the infant-parent bond. “This bond developed very early in our evolution to keep mothers and their offspring physically close and protect babies from predators,” Kotrschal told us. “As a result, the young of many species are wired to want to be near their mothers and to look at them as a reliable source of safety and comfort.”

Attachment doesn't just keep infants physically safe. It provides emotional security as well. Dozens of studies of human infants and children have shown that those who form secure attachments to their parents—who have learned to trust that their guardians will care for them and protect them from harm—are better able to develop the confidence they need to explore their environments, cultivate friendships, venture ever farther afield, and, eventually, flourish as independent adults.

Healthy attachments allow children to see the world as a positive place and become resilient enough to rebound from adversity. They help children develop, among other things, courage. And those reliable bonds aren't just important for the young. We need them, and continue to forge them, throughout our lives with friends and romantic partners—relationships we trust and rely on for emotional support and comfort. Moreover, Kotrschal says, the bond we form with our pets is remarkably similar.

There's a reason so many of us find it completely natural to think of our pets as family members. The basis for the mother-infant bond and all the important attachments that follow in its wake—including with animals—is largely biological. Bonding, attachment, caregiving, and social relationships are driven, on the most basic level, by ancient structures in the brain. This “social network,” as biologists call it, may

have developed four hundred fifty million years ago in an ancestor that all mammals share. “This handful of brain regions hasn’t changed much in structure and function over the past five hundred million years, and it’s the basis for instinctive social behavior in humans and cats and dogs, as well as many other species,” says Kotrschal. From the moment you adopt an animal, you begin to mobilize this ancient cognitive machinery designed to protect our species by stimulating attachment.

Not everyone successfully bonds with their pets. We all know people for whom adoptions haven’t worked out, or who become attached in an unhealthy way, allowing a dog or cat to serve as a stand-in for vital human connections in their lives. But having seen thousands of rescue animals find happy homes, I know that the majority of people form deep ties with their new companions—and those relationships often become a mainstay of joy, camaraderie, safety, and courage.

*Surprising Things Happen When You Become  
Attached to a Pet*

Several years ago, leading researchers in the attachment research field from the University of California at Davis and Israel’s Interdisciplinary Center collaborated on two groundbreaking studies that illuminate how deeply we bond with our pets—and reveal the potentially meaningful role those bonds can play in our lives. In the first, the researchers assessed 165 pet owners’ attachment to their cats or dogs with a questionnaire designed to determine if they had a healthy bond. Then they divided the participants into three groups and asked them to list all their current personal life goals—their hopes and dreams for the future—and rate the likelihood of achieving each goal on a seven-point scale. One group had their pet in the room with them while they completed the task; the second group was prompted through a writing exercise to think about their absent pets while they wrote about their goals; and a third group worked



on the assignment alone, after being cued with a writing exercise to think about a person they knew but weren't close to.

The results: Among participants who were securely attached to their pets, being with their animals—or even just thinking about them—allowed them to list more personal goals and express more confidence in their ability to meet them. Participants were able to engage in a richer exploration of their goals because their pets served as a “secure base,” just as human attachment figures can—a type of support that helps you feel more comfortable and confident about trying new things, pursuing goals, engaging in challenging activities, and taking reasonable risks.

The same researchers conducted a second trial designed to assess whether a dog or cat can serve as a “safe haven,” another indispensable type of support that gives us a sense of comfort, reassurance, and protection in times of danger or distress, just as a good friend or close family member would. Having an ally (human or animal) who provides a safe haven helps you cope more effectively with stressful life events and can actually lead to better physical and mental health. In this study, the researchers enlisted a new set of 120 participants and divided them into the same three groups as before (one had their pets with them, the second just thought about their pets, and the third didn't have a pet present and thought about a random person). Then each group completed a particularly tricky timed word test specifically designed to elicit feelings of failure and frustration. Researchers took participants' blood pressure before the challenge as well as during the test.

When they crunched the numbers, the results were remarkable. Compared to people in the no-pet condition, those whose pets were in the room with them, or who merely thought about their cat or dog, were more likely to say the test felt like a challenge rather than a threat, and also remained calmer, with diastolic and systolic blood pressure that was several points lower.

Together, the studies indicate that pets, like supportive friends and loved ones, provide their owners with a secure base from which

they can explore the world, pursue ambitions, and grow as people, and also serve as a safe haven that can provide comfort and soothe their distress in times of need. Think about that: Our pets can help us stay calmer in the face of stress and more confident about our ability to attain life goals. The same furry characters who track mud on the carpet, shred armchairs, chew shoes, and leave filaments of fur on practically everything we own also provide a vital sense of emotional security that is the wellspring for our ability to function bravely in the world.

Reams of research show that healthy attachments are vital to our well-being. And attachment is just the first phase in the natural arc of every single important relationship in our lives—an arc that follows a path from attachment and bonding to separation, loss, and the painful process of bereavement. From there, if we move through the sadness and don't start closing ourselves off, we're able to form new attachments and repeat the process all over, from happiness to heartbreak and back again. By virtue of animals' ability to show us unfiltered affection and loyalty—and their heartbreakingly short life spans—they give us a safe way to practice and hone our ability to move through the ups and downs of the bonding cycle. As a result, our uncomplicated relationships with cats and dogs help us become better at meeting people, loving deeply, coping with loss and grief and, afterward, establishing new relationships that allow us to reclaim joy and fearlessly entrust our hearts to another. They help us more courageously embrace *life*.

### *A Fearful Dog Offers a Lesson in Bravery*

Over the years, I've seen this bolstering effect of pets play out in many different ways. Two years before I heard Grace's and Jonathan's stories, another moving anecdote arrived in my inbox—this one featuring Nigel, a timid ninety-pound black Lab mix, who gave Amanda Ellis Bronowski, twenty-nine, of Moscow, Idaho, the conviction to confront a nightmare that was unfolding under her own roof.

At nineteen, Amanda began dating a handsome, charming man, and the first six months of their relationship were fairy-tale perfect. “He was attentive and sweet. He’d cook me dinner and surprise me with little gifts,” she says. Then, disturbing cracks began to appear. When she made plans with her friends, he’d question where she was going and whom she was going to be with. Soon, the questions escalated to accusations of flirting, of cheating. He picked fights and called her names. *Slut. Whore. Crazy bitch.* “Every time he got out of control, he’d end up crying and apologizing, and he always had a different excuse: He’s depressed, he’s suicidal, he has trust issues because his old girlfriend cheated on him,” she says. “He knew the right story to get me to stay.”

Amanda never so much as hinted at his bad behavior to anyone. She was too ashamed—and kept hoping he’d change. Besides, by the time they’d been together three years, she had almost no close friends left. “He got so stressed every time I went out; it was easier to just do things with him,” she says. The one true ally who was with her through it all: Nigel. Amanda’s mom had found the big black stray when she was hiking not far from her home in the summer of 2007. They couldn’t find anyone who had lost a dog. After reading that dogs and cats with black fur linger the longest in shelters—their dark features are less distinct than lighter-colored animals’, which can make it seem harder at first to create an emotional connection—she decided to keep him, a decision that delighted Amanda, who was home from her freshman year of college at the time.

“I bonded with Nigel from moment one. He followed me everywhere,” she says. The big, kindhearted stray turned out to be afraid of *everything*—garbage cans, bicycles, vacuums, thunder. “He stole my heart because he was just this sweet, cowardly dog,” says Amanda. When she moved in with her boyfriend a year later, Nigel came, too. “He saw it all—the arguments, the belittling, the making up. During that time, Nigel became my best friend. He was always there when I needed comfort,” she says.

One night Amanda and her boyfriend began arguing over

something trivial—Amanda doesn't even remember what triggered the spat—and she told him she was leaving. "I was lying on our bed with Nigel. My boyfriend was standing in the doorway—and he went ballistic. He began yelling, then grabbed the nightstand and threw it across the room," recalls Amanda. "When he turned around, Nigel was standing over my body, staring intently at him. He was shaking like a leaf and his tail was tucked between his legs, but he didn't break eye contact, and his body language was clear. He was saying, 'If you touch her, you'll regret it.' Even though he was terrified, he was prepared to defend me."

In that moment, Amanda finally saw her situation clearly. "I saw my boyfriend from Nigel's perspective, and I was forced to admit something I'd been in denial about for years: I was in an abusive relationship," she says. "I suddenly couldn't believe I'd put either Nigel or myself in such danger. I grabbed his leash and a laundry basket full of clean clothes, and he and I walked out the door. But the truth is, I might have gone back, because my self-esteem was so low. When a loved one abuses you, it makes you feel like you're not a valuable, worthy human being. But I kept thinking of that moment when Nigel stood over me, and that image helped me stay strong. He helped me find the courage to stay away and rebuild my life and my self-confidence."

It's like Brené Brown says: "Courage is contagious. Every time we choose courage, we make everyone around us a little better and the world a little braver."

If ever a situation calls for bravery, it's leaving an abusive relationship. One in four women in the United States are victims of physical violence at the hands of their partners, and nearly twice as many endure psychological abuse—and the risk of violence skyrockets when women threaten to leave. All types of abuse can erode victims' self-esteem and lead to depression, but researchers at California State University found that emotional violence may cause even deeper wounds than physical abuse. Emotional cruelty slowly chips away at the very core of who you are. At a certain point, some

victims no longer trust themselves to be able to function outside the unhealthy relationship, one reason they don't leave. But with an animal by their side, victims are often better able to maintain their self-esteem and emotional stability, and sometimes have a potent stimulus to leave.

Curious to learn more about how this might work, we contacted Amy Fitzgerald, a researcher at the University of Windsor in Canada who has undertaken a number of studies on the role animals play in the lives of domestic violence victims. She told us she began thinking about the topic when she was volunteering at an animal shelter, where she processed the paperwork for people relinquishing animals. "Quite a few women said they had to get rid of their pets because their partners were threatening or harming the animals, so for my master's thesis I decided to study it," she says.

After conducting in-depth interviews with twenty-six domestic abuse survivors, Fitzgerald found that, just as Nigel did for Amanda, pets frequently protect women from their abusers by meowing, barking, or even attacking the abuser. Animals also shield women emotionally, Fitzgerald told us—even, in some cases, preventing victims from taking their own lives. "Their pets were often their lifeline—the companionship and emotional support that pulled them through."

Dogs and cats may be especially well suited to support abused women for a number of reasons. "They don't judge, and they're uniquely able to offer comfort, often when no one else could, or would," she explains. "For some women, their pets became an integral part of their ability to survive and sometimes were the motivation for leaving the relationship."

At the same time, animals can also be the reason some women stay. Research shows that about a third of domestic violence victims don't leave because they can't find a women's shelter to go to that accepts pets. They're afraid of what will happen to their cats or dogs if they leave them behind, since abusers often see pets as a way to threaten, manipulate, and, by harming the animals, heap

more abuse on their victims. But animal shelters are becoming more aware of the problem and trying to help. Our Ani-Safe program at Humane Society Silicon Valley offers accommodations for the pets of domestic violence victims—and the Animal Welfare Institute has a searchable database of rescue facilities across the country that have similar options. (Go to [awionline.org/safe-havens](http://awionline.org/safe-havens). Also, additional resources can be found at [safeplaceforpets.org](http://safeplaceforpets.org) and [redrover.org](http://redrover.org).) Still, more work needs to be done to address the problem. “Pets are an overlooked, but incredibly important, piece of the domestic violence equation,” says Fitzgerald. “Battered women shelters and support groups are aware of the problem, which is good, but most don’t ask about pets in any formal way. We hope that by raising awareness we can solve that problem.”

### *Rescue Pets and the Biology of Bonding*

Animals can also bolster us through less dramatic circumstances by providing what I think of as “small c” courage. It’s not the type of superhuman valor you need in life-or-death circumstances. It’s the chutzpah we call upon routinely to meet everyday challenges. In the introduction, I told the story of my cat, Wilbur, and his fondness for kitchen drawers. But Wilbur’s antics were more than just amusing. His presence along with Wiley’s, my other cat, were essential to my well-being. I was living in Santa Rosa, California, and running a newly acquired company for Intuit—a two-hour drive from friends and a five-hour flight from family. I’d underestimated just how hard that would be. I was lonely, stressed, and working long hours, with little time to meet new people. But I’d made a professional commitment to turn this company around and had to find some way to cope.

One lonely night, I was sitting on the sofa. Wilbur was nestled in the crook of my arm and Wiley was purring on my lap when it occurred to me: I was staying afloat in large part because of them. Yes, I was stressed and lonely. But I woke up every morning and

came home every night to two loyal felines, who knew nothing, and cared even less, about balance sheets. Their expertise lay in a very human, and vital, contact sport: snuggling. As important, they made me laugh, offered companionship, and gave me the chance to nurture living creatures instead of bottom lines. By doing so, they kept me centered and kept me sane.

Because my affection for Wilbur and Wiley was a form of healthy attachment, being with them, petting them, nuzzling them, and singing made-up songs to them didn't just lift me emotionally; it affected me physically, says Kotrschal. Deep under my skin, a chemical that's associated with bonding and love was surging through my body. We'll talk more about this in coming chapters, but being with pets is profoundly grounding partly because it triggers the release of oxytocin, the same hormone that's released when moms breast-feed their newborns and the most important hormone involved in the brain's primitive social network. Oxytocin is the glue that cements that first, pivotal relationship—and it's at work, too, when we're falling in love. It's found in most mammals, not just humans. And because it encourages bonding, it pushes us to ally ourselves with "safe" others, which gives us the courage to function in uncertain and trying circumstances.

The sense of safety Grace and the other traumatized students at Stoneman Douglas felt as they snuggled and bonded with Karma was likely the result of oxytocin. And when Ajax rolled over for a belly rub and gazed into Jonathan's eyes, a burst of oxytocin almost certainly surged through his system (and probably Ajax's) as well; as their relationship deepened, so, too, did oxytocin's effects, making Jonathan feel secure and restoring his faith in himself.

Like so many others who have adopted rescue animals during difficult moments, these traumatized young people learned something surprising: The secure relationship we develop with our pets can be the foundation that makes it possible for us to process our pain rather than be consumed by it, and sometimes even be courageous enough to give the gift of strength to others.

Nigel showed Amanda how to summon the nerve to say “No more” and gave her the confidence to give love another chance. She reconnected with a man she had known through work. He was kind, supportive, patient, calm. When he proposed, she happily said yes. “He adores me and loves and appreciates the dog that changed my life as much as I do,” she says. Ajax helped Jonathan regain his equilibrium, reconnect with friends and family, and join his fellow Parkland students in speaking out about gun violence. Grace made key chains and sold them to raise funds both for the victims of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas shooting and for the animal-assisted therapy program at Humane Society of Broward County. And Karma’s remarkable ability to comfort the traumatized Stoneman Douglas students inspired Marni Bellavia, the manager of that animal-assisted therapy program, to start a state-of-the-art initiative at the shelter. Known as Canines for Community Resilience, the therapy teams are undergoing training with the police and fire departments and local hospitals to help them act as first responders in a range of traumatic situations.

Brené Brown is right: Courage *is* contagious. And rescue animals, survivors one and all, can pass it on to us. We just need to be bold enough to embrace it.



## About the Author and Collaborator

**Carol Novello** is founder of Mutual Rescue™, a national initiative focused on changing the conversation from “people *or* animals” to “people *and* animals” with the aim of elevating the cause of animal welfare. Through authentic storytelling, Mutual Rescue presents compelling evidence that when people adopt homeless animals, their own lives are often dramatically transformed in positive ways as well. *Eric & Peety*, the first Mutual Rescue film, has been viewed more than 100 million times across the globe. Mutual Rescue also drives engagement at the local level by encouraging people to take shelter dogs on outings in the community through Doggy Day Out programs. Carol is now expanding the initiative into a national non-profit brand to bring new funding into the sector through corporate sponsorships in order to advance both the practice of shelter medicine and collaboration between animal welfare and human services organizations across the United States.

Carol is also president of Humane Society Silicon Valley (HSSV), one of the largest privately funded animal rescue organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area. Through her leadership, HSSV became a “model shelter”—the first organization ever to meet all guidelines set forth by the Association of Shelter Veterinarians. Her work at HSSV has resulted in significant increases in the rescue organization’s adoption numbers, save rate, and the number of animals receiving extended care.

Previously, Carol was a senior executive at Intuit, Inc., where she held numerous positions including president of MasterBuilder

Software, vice president/general manager of QuickBooks Online, vice president—marketing for QuickBooks and Small Business Products and Services, and vice president/general manager of Quicken and QuickBooks Checks, Forms, and Supplies.

Carol has an MBA from Harvard Business School and a BA in economics and English from Dickinson College. She has been recognized with the prestigious Maddie Hero Award for innovation and leadership in the animal welfare sector, as an honoree at the Fifty Years of Women at Harvard Business School celebration in Northern California, and named a Woman of Influence by *San Jose Business Journal*. Her family includes three rescue animals: Tess, a German shepherd, and tuxedo cats Bode and Herbie. She lives in Los Altos, California.

**Ginny Graves** specializes in bringing wellness, mental health, fitness, and medical reporting to life for general audiences. An award-winning journalist, she has spent her thirty-year career crafting narratives about people and the issues that fascinate, worry, beset, and inspire them. She is best known for her massive trove of in-depth magazine features, which have enlivened the pages and been touted on the covers of *O The Oprah Magazine*, *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Glamour*, *Runner's World*, *TIME*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Reader's Digest*, and *National Geographic Adventure*. She has also collaborated on a number of books, including *Bringing Home the Bacon: Making Marriage Work When She Makes More Money*. When she's not meeting deadlines, she's usually on the trails or at the beach with her three dogs near her home in Fairfax, California.

Adopting an animal will save a life and enrich yours but adopting the right animal for your lifestyle is key. Reach out to local shelters who can help make a match and assist with safely and appropriately introducing you to a new animal. When approaching an unknown stray animal, practice safety first and call your local shelter for assistance if needed.

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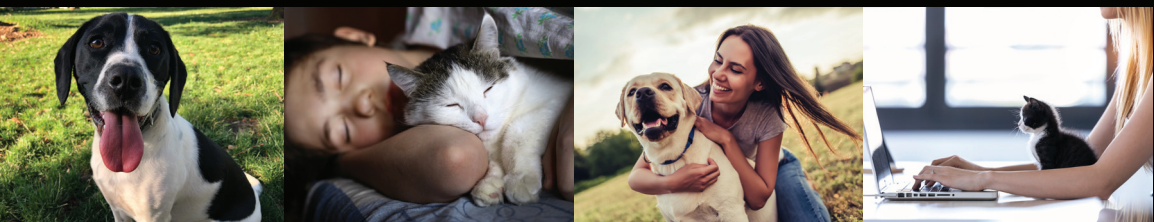
# A MOVING AND SCIENTIFIC LOOK AT THE THERAPEUTIC POWER OF RESCUING A HOMELESS ANIMAL.

Anyone who has an adopted dog or cat knows the delight and comfort pets bring to everyday life, and in many cases, can be transformative. When Carol Novello began working at Humane Society Silicon Valley, she discovered evidence of the life-changing impact homeless animals have on people—how they could lift moods, enhance physical well-being, and improve people’s ability to communicate and connect.

*MUTUAL RESCUE* is a collection of these real accounts from people whose lives have been forever altered by giving a home to an animal in need. Novello explores one aspect of pet adoption and the many ways it expands and enriches people’s lives. The beautifully complex roles that pets play when they become part of our families.

You’ll meet people whose rescued animals gave them the strength to face trauma and grief. Ultimately you will learn of pets that have helped individuals cope and recover from physical illnesses, injuries, or obesity; and you’ll see how rescued pets offer hope to those afflicted with depression, loneliness, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Helping people live with more meaning and compassion, rescued pets can often be a profound source of healing.

This illuminating look into the potential of pets to shape our lives and open our hearts will transform the way you think about homeless animals and their place in the world.



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