

CHAPTER 10

A Home for the Homeless: Peace Plantation

In my years of working with animals, I've gotten to know some wonderful people—people like Ruby Brown, Alice Morgan Wright, and Virginia Sargent. And I've depended on these individuals to help get our enormous job done, just as others depend on us to help them care for their animals when they are no longer able.

So often we receive calls from elderly or ill people who find themselves unable to keep their beloved pets any longer. Heartbroken at the idea that they must give up their faithful companions, they must also try to protect them from euthanasia, the animals' certain fate would they go to the local dog pound.

I'll never forget one of these individuals—an elderly man called John. I heard about John through a lady who was a friend of mine. She had seen him in the check-out line of a grocery store in Washington, D.C., and noticed that he was buying nothing but cat food.

"You must have a lot of cats," she remarked to him.

"No, only two," he told her. "I can't afford any more."

My friend offered to help John by giving him some money. She was worried because he wasn't buying any food for himself, and she knew that often impoverished pet owners will go hungry rather than deprive their animals of food.

But John refused her offer, confiding that his immediate worry was not cash, but a place to live.

"I'm living in a rooming-house, and the landlady tells me I have to leave my quarters by the first of the month. I can't find a new place where I can take my cats, and I just don't know what to do," he said.

My friend called me, arranging for me to come and get John's cats. He called these precious companions Itty and Bitty. The thought of parting from them was breaking his heart. When I met him, he started to cry.

"If I could only have gotten some work, maybe I could have found a home for them," he said. John was at least 80 years old at the time, and none to well, but I thought perhaps there was a chance he could find some gainful employment.

"Well, what do you do?" I asked him.

"I'm an auto mechanic. But I'd do anything. Even if I could find work as a gardener. Do you know anybody who needs a gardener?"

I wanted to laugh. I myself barely knew the difference between a rose and a dandelion, and Peace Plantation was in dire need of somebody to keep the grounds in order. "I do!" I said, and I offered John the job in exchange for room and board for him and his cats.

He was thrilled. John and Itty and Bitty came to our place in April. By June, the gardens and lawns were beautiful. I thought I had a gold mine in John. Sadly, he died the following October. But he never had to be separated from his beloved animal friends; and, at the very end of his life, he knew the satisfaction of being useful, of being wanted, and of being cared for, even if it was only for a very short time.

John was like many of the animals we take in at Peace Plantation.—not in the best of health, no longer in the prime of life, overlooked by an uncaring world. For me, his story is a good example of my philosophy that *all* life is precious, that *every* living being deserves an opportunity to live out his or her days in peace. And that's why I am so happy to have a thriving

Peace Plantation operating in Walton, New York, and a healthy National Humane Education Society, working hard to protect animals all across our great nation.

A Day in the Life of Peace Plantation

If you were to visit Peace Plantation, you'd drive into the countryside, taking New York State Route 206 to our facility. You'd see a huge barn amidst the lush, rolling hills, with several additions built on to accommodate cats and dogs. When you walked through the barn doors, you'd be amazed: though so many animals live in this big structure, there's not a whiff of animal odor there, because the Peace Plantation staff lovingly keeps every kennel, every square foot of space scrupulously clean.

You'd see cats in their large, open colony rooms, roaming at will in-and-out to large fenced-in grassy yards or to enclosed patios or porches where they roll in the grass or bask in the sunshine. You'd see immediately that these animals get a lot of love, whether they are with us for only a few days before being adopted to a suitable owner, or whether they are with us for the rest of their lives.

In no case is a healthy animal ever put to sleep at Peace Plantation.

The Peace Plantation daily routine begins at feeding time, 8:00 a.m., when our staff swings into operation. Staff members monitor the animals while they eat. If any animals do not eat, they are scheduled for a check by the veterinary technician, just to make sure they are okay.

Once a week, *all* the animals with a problem are checked over by our staff veterinarian. But every day, our veterinary technicians and animal care attendants are on hand to take care of the animals' routine needs. Each new animal coming into Peace Plantation must be checked carefully, immunized, and neutered or spayed if he or she has not been already. That's a lot of care to be given. And all the healthy residents must be cared for, too: petted and talked to, brushed, played with. Some need their nails trimmed or their ears cleaned.

Meanwhile, the feeding dishes must be washed, the animals' areas cleaned, sheets and blankets laundered, and fresh water provided. And the Peace Plantation administrative staff must make sure we are well stocked with food and veterinary supplies, that our facility remains in good repair, and that we respond to the many, many calls for help we get every day. They work, too, to find good homes for our precious charges and to encourage the local community to spay and neuter their animals.

People sometimes say we should charge for the services we provide, but I disagree. The NHES is a true charity. When we start putting price tags on our services, people will stop providing their generous, heartfelt donations. I believe we get more support by not demanding payment. Our policy is best for the poor whose animals need help. And my belief has been borne out by the kindness of so many donors across America...people who have never even seen our Peace Plantation.

I've been tempted sometimes, though, to ask for payment for our services—only because our funds sometimes get so low, especially in winter, when the animals need us so much. [Ultimately, we plan to build a second, larger Peace Plantation on NHES's 24-acre site in West Virginia.]

But that's just part of NHES's overall plan. And Peace Plantation is just one part of the work we do.

Meanwhile, Back in Leesburg...

While my daughter Virginia and her husband, Earl Dungan, oversee the operation of Peace Plantation, with the assistance of our 22 indispensable and dedicated staff members, our headquarters staff in Leesburg keeps up its hectic pace.

I still live near Leesburg myself, keeping a number of animals in a facility close by in West Virginia. But I spend most of my time—seven days a week, in fact—working for NHES.

That means I might be in our modest offices in Leesburg with our hard-working staff. What does my typical day include? Just about anything. I might be writing letters to editors of magazines like *Reader's Digest* to protest pro-vivisection articles on behalf of NHES's members. I might be driving to another state to pick up a family of cats whose owner can no longer care for them, since she is dying of cancer, or forced to enter a nursing home.

I might be out talking to people about issues. I might be writing an article for our *Quarterly Journal*, which goes to people across America, our most important educational vehicle.

I might be talking to schoolchildren or civic groups about the importance of responsible pet ownership or other humane issues. I might be peacefully picketing a research laboratory with other NHES members, asking them to stop putting animals through endless torture.

Or I might be sitting down with our Executive Director to figure out how to make up the difference between our expenses—always growing, just as the number of animals in need continues to grow—and our income.

That financial crunch is always a worry, especially with so many animals in need of our help. But we of The National Humane Education Society have been blessed by the support of many kind men and women, especially in recent years. In fact, in January 1988, I found myself in our Executive Director's office, stunned by an important realization.

"I can't believe it," I told him. "In the 39 years of NHES's existence, this is the first time."

Unintentionally, I left the poor man guessing for a few moments of silence.

"The first time for what?" he asked me.

"Why, here it is, the first of the year," I said slowly, "and all our bills are paid. That has never happened before."

I must confess I shed a tear or two that day. All my life I have gone begging to get the money needed to keep our animals alive and well. I have not wanted to do it, but seeing no alternative, I have done it willingly. And, of course, for the vast majority of the years I have worked for NHES, I have done so as a volunteer, foregoing any type of compensation or honoraria. I have done that willingly, too, though it meant my working another full-time job for many years.

Now, because the word has spread about our work, thousands of kind people across America have come to our aid. This has just happened in the last few years, and I am unbelievably grateful.

At last, at the ripe young age of 80, I could stop begging.

Still, our needs are many. Often, urgent calls to Peace Plantation ask us to take in one more homeless dog...one more family of kittens that will surely die if we don't take them in. We stretch the budget as thin as we can, and we manage to do what must be done. But I live with the fear that one day we may no longer be able to help.

When these worries overtake me, I think of my late husband and his never-ending optimism. I think of Ruby Brown and her tireless love for our animals. And I think to myself,

“Not only will we never turn away a needy animal—but we’re going to serve more and more animals. We’re going to dream big!”

After all, God’s lesser creatures need someone to speak for them. Every day, more beautiful animals need our help. We *must* look to the future on their behalf.

That is why I want to share my big dreams with you.

The Future of The National Humane Education Society

As I write these words, Peace Plantation has many urgent needs. So when I say we no longer need to beg, I mean only that I am freed from the daily worry that our animals might not be fed. We are still operating on a shoestring, as efficiently as possible. The only volunteers we have are several caring ladies who often visit just to pet the animals.

Right now, we’re in need of a new Peace Plantation vehicle for rescuing and transporting animals. We have two road-worthy vehicles at the sanctuary. One is a van with 78,000 miles on it and the other is a covered truck with 140,000 miles, both of which often make the 300-mile round trip to New York City several times a week, for rescues. We have a truck with 300,000 miles on it that’s still running, and a Jeep we’ve had since 1979. We use these as farm vehicles only—they are not safe to take on the road.

Also, and perhaps most urgently, we need more housing for our animals. I’d love not to have to board out any animals, even temporarily, because it costs so much more to do so. And, as the demand for our services grows, I want to be ready to accommodate *every* animal who needs us. We can only hope to do this if we can build new buildings at our Walton facility, *and*—my fondest dream—establish another Peace Plantation near our headquarters in Leesburg, Virginia.

Optimistic people say “*when* it happens,” not “*if* it happens.” So, I’ll phrase my dream this way: *When* we build our second Peace Plantation near Leesburg, I hope we can also fulfill a very old dream of mine by building a national humane education center. Here, children of all ages (up to 100 years and more!) could come and get to know animals, see exhibits about humane treatment of animals, learn how to fulfill their responsibilities to God’s precious creatures, whether they are hummingbirds or humpback whales.

No such center exists in the United States today, and I have longed to build it for over 30 years. Now it is my hope that we will be able to do so—with help from kind people who love animals.

Speaking for Those Who Cannot Speak for Themselves

Of course, there’s another major part of NHES’s work: animal advocacy. In this book, you have read about the many outrages perpetrated on animals today, from neglect and abandonment to the staged cruelty of bullfights, from the torture condoned by supposedly great scientists to the agony of fur-bearing creatures caught in vicious traps, from the death of 10 million unwanted puppies and kittens each year to the shrinking environment which will wipe out *all* animal life someday, including humans, unless we do something now.

The work we do is *vital*, and we are in a better position to do it now than ever before, because our membership has swollen to over 130,000 men and women across the United States. Now, we can rally our forces and make a difference when pro-animal legislation is before Congress. Now, we can stand up and speak for the animals who cannot speak for themselves. And with our combined voices, we can make a real difference.

For me, this is a continuation of the work Briggsie did in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, the work he was doing on the day he died. It is the crusade whose success or failure will determine the future of billions of animals—even the future of the planet. For if we, the human race, do not care about animal life, then we do not care about life itself. And we will prove it ultimately by destroying our beautiful planet.

Animal advocacy and our rescue and shelter work is the mission of my life, the work I hope to be engaged in until I die, the work I hope will continue long beyond my lifetime, shepherded by the caring, dedicated people who now help me run NHES. My daughter, Virginia Dungan, has voiced her hope of carrying on the work of her parents. She has served as the vice president of The National Human Education Society since 1983.

I'm hopeful that Peace Plantation is the kind of place today that Briggsie envisioned when he started his Be Kind to Animals Rest Farm in 1920. And I hope, too, that he is proud to see NHES's strong membership rallying in support of the causes he championed. I dare to hope that he is looking down from his Heavenly home and giving us his blessing.

Because I love animals so much, dear reader, I'm bold enough to hope that you, too, will give us your blessing...that you will support NHES in all its work by making a donation of any size today. You can rest assured that it will be put to good use immediately. If you can possibly arrange to visit our office in Leesburg, Virginia, or our sanctuary at Walton, New York, please do so.