

Tuesday, May 15, 2007

The woman behind the bill



HERE KITTY, KITTIES: Animal activist Judie Mancuso spearheaded the bill to require Californians to spay and neuter their cats and dogs.

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Judie Mancuso says 320 groups support the California Healthy Pets Act, but breeder associations are fighting it hard.

By LORI BASHEDA
The Orange County Register

So how does a pork chop-eating, nightclub-dancing Sicilian from St. Louis become a vegan animal rescuer who is now the driving force behind an impassioned campaign to curb pet overpopulation in California?

Well, movie star Pierce Brosnan's wife had no small hand in the matter. Then there was the ordeal at Rancho Lotsa Cats. In the end, though, it was the Katrina catastrophe that opened the door for Judie Mancuso to spearhead the bill which would require Californians to spay and neuter their pets if it passes this fall.

But perhaps we should take things a bit slower. Let's begin in 1988.

Fresh from St. Louis, Mancuso was sharing an apartment with a roommate on Hollywood Boulevard. Like many 25-year-olds, her life revolved around her computer job and her social life. She went dancing with girlfriends, hit the band bars and ate various forms of chicken without a second thought.

But as fate would have it, her upstairs neighbor was the tomato-planting, earth-protecting Keely Shaye Smith. Smith was a personality on ABC's morning Home Show, producing a weekly segment dedicated to things like the health of the planet.

One day Smith (a Newport Beach native still four years away from meeting future husband Pierce Brosnan) showed Mancuso a segment she had produced on animal shelters. Viewers got to take that long walk with dogs and cats from their cages to the euthanasia table.

"Kittens. Puppies. And they end up just killin' 'em, ya know?" Mancuso said the other day over a slice of tofu cheesecake at the vegan diner Native Foods in Costa Mesa.

She remembers crying for hours. "And then the head just starts spinning. That whole ignorance is bliss thing; that never fit into my way of thinking. Once I have the information, I need to do something with it."

About the same time, Smith had given Mancuso "Diet for a New America," a vegan classic that details the often brutal life and death of farm animals. "I was eating meat; meatballs, the whole deal," Mancuso says. "I'm Sicilian. Hey, man. That's all I knew."

Between the dead puppies and the dirty chickens, Mancuso felt compelled to change the way she was living. She quit eating animals and began volunteering at Earth Save.

In 1995 Mancuso moved to Orange County. She took a seat on the board of Animal Rescue Foundation, Dana Point, and began fostering a revolving door of pets, nursing them to health and finding them homes.

She also began sending money to Rancho Lotsa Cats. Then one day in 2003 she got a call from San Diego Animal Control; 135 filthy, wheezing cats were found at the sanctuary. Officers found Mancuso's phone number on an old check. The cats were going to be euthanized, they told her, unless someone found them homes.

For three months, Mancuso rallied volunteers and raised money. "We got every one of those cats out of there, and they moved on to better lives."

The ordeal led her and her husband, Rolf Wicklund, to have a heart-to-heart. "What is success?" they asked. "Is it about making a lot of money or is it doing something meaningful?"

Wicklund, 39, has a software development company. The couple had already decided they would not have children so they could devote their life to animals. Now they decided that Mancuso, who had just turned 40, would quit her job and become a full-time volunteer.

This did not go over well with the family back in the Midwest. Mancuso grew up middle class. Dad was a truck driver, mom a housewife. It was bad enough when Mancuso returned home one day and rejected her mom's spiedini, an Italian treat of rolled meat on a stick.

"For me not to want spiedinis – holy mackerel!" Mancuso says. Her family blamed it on the bad influence of those fruit-loop Californians. But turning your back on a meatball is one thing; turning your back on financial security is another.

"You should get paid for this!" her mom said.

"By who?" Mancuso asked. "What? Are the dogs and kitties gonna get a jar together?"

Her timing couldn't have been better. Shortly after quitting work, Katrina hit. Jane Garrison, a fellow rescuer from Redondo Beach, called Mancuso, crying. She was in New Orleans; dogs were tethered to fences, floating in cages. Mancuso was on the next plane. A week later she returned to Laguna and wrote a computer program for Animal Rescue New Orleans, working 12-hour days for the next six months to reunite pets with their owners.

As the rescue effort wound down, Los Angeles Animal Services General Manager Ed Boks held a press conference, encouraging the public to adopt shelter animals to make room for Katrina pets.

Mancuso knew Boks had a "no-kill" philosophy. The only way to reduce euthanasia is to reduce the pet population. Here was her chance. She showed up at the press conference, introduced herself to Boks and asked if he would do a spay-and-neuter bill with her.

Over the next year, the two birthed the California Healthy Pets Act. The bill is making its way through the Legislature. It would require residents to spay and neuter their cats and dogs by the time the animals are four months old. The list of supporters is 320 long and includes rescue groups, the California Veterinary Medical Association and the California Animal Control Directors Association.

But breeder associations are fighting hard. The bill would require people who want to breed dogs to get a permit -- every year. Breeders consider it a tax and are pouring millions of dollars into the fight. The American Kennel Club Web site rallies opponents.

To raise money for the battle, Mancuso last summer started the nonprofit Social Compassion, which is based in Orange County.

Bill supporters say they're not out to hurt breeders, just curb euthanasia and fiscal waste. In 2005, city and county shelters took in more than 840,000 cats and dogs. Some 430,000 were killed. The cost to taxpayers: \$250 million.

"Judie is the campaign chairman for an initiative that could change animal welfare ... in California," Boks says. "She's a force of nature. She's a consensus builder. She brings people to the table."

Just don't expect her to serve you a pork chop.

Contact the writer: 714-932-1705 or lbasheda@ocregister.com