

Founding Refuge

An Interview with Lenore Braford, founder of Piedmont Farm Animal Refuge, Pittsboro, NC

(GFAS Accredited 2019)

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At GFAS, we can all agree that sanctuary founders are special people. Anyone familiar with sanctuary work knows the tenacity and dedication of those willing to give their all to help save animals. It is a job that never rests.

But what does it really take to create and run such an organization? Lenore Braford, founder and shelter director of GFAS Accredited Piedmont Farm Animal

Refuge (hereafter referred to as just “The Refuge”) gives us a glimpse inside her sanctuary story.

Lenore had spent most of her life, from middle school on, working with and advocating for children on the autism spectrum. Although citing a lifelong “affinity for animals”, starting a sanctuary was not on her radar. In fact, she didn’t realize farm sanctuaries existed until a fated internet search one day after going vegan. But this piqued her interest and after realizing she didn’t want to continue in her current career path, Lenore spent the next 5 years at Farm Sanctuary, Woodstock Farm Sanctuary, Pig Pals, and Carolina Tiger Rescue (most of which are GFAS accredited) getting her feet wet. “There are so many crossovers between sanctuary work, regardless of species”; each provided insight into how sanctuaries can do their job well.

Once Lenore had decided she would move forward with her dream, she started looking for support, and land. She remarks that unlike some, she went about starting the sanctuary “by the book” - she wanted to make sure she had all her ducks in a row (land, safe housing, supplies, funding, governance, etc) before she actually started rescuing any birds. She knew that some disagreed with her cautious approach in favor of starting rescues as soon as possible, but Lenore says that she had seen the repercussions, especially for the animals, of sanctuaries shutting down due to lack of preparation; she preferred a slow and steady start to win this race.

Lenore also had unique help in constructing her dream sanctuary - her partner Paul. With a degree in architecture and fervent support for Lenore’s vision, Paul “really wanted to contribute to special housing design for animals.” Paul was able to design unique barns and enclosures for the animals based on Lenore’s knowledge of their needs and preferences, out of quality materials that would last. Rather than grabbing pre-fabricated enclosures from the home improvement store, they preferred being thoughtful about their design and the life of the materials, once again choosing “slow and sustainable” in their setup.

Lenore says she had been advised to start rescuing birds first, because “chickens are the hardest”. As a result of genetic manipulation by the broiler and egg industries, chickens are

the most difficult to care for due to the diseases and illnesses that are a by-product of their breeding. The resulting vet visits are easier on fledgling sanctuaries because the birds are small enough to be transported in any vehicle - Lenore has lost count of how many chickens have ridden in her car! Lenore relies on not only her own expertise, but that of her board of advisors and the sanctuary's vet to provide the best care for the animals. She sees her role as being "an advocate for that animal and thinking outside the box to get to a solution" - and often that means researching novel treatment options and coming up with unique remedies.

When we asked what her average day at the sanctuary was like, Lenore responded that she is the "wearer of many hats". Today she did the morning animal care since no volunteers were available, then switched gears to working on a fundraiser, and spent part of the afternoon researching building materials for their next barn, all while keeping her fingers on the pulse of all the sanctuary's ongoing projects. She says she loves not doing the same thing every day, rather, she is the conductor that keeps everything moving. She admits sometimes it's hard to juggle the animal care and business side of things, especially if a wardrobe change is required, but where she sees inefficiency, we imagine a superwoman in a phone booth moment.

There's no doubt that sanctuary life is full of challenges, even for superheroes. Lenore says that the passing of animals, especially after getting to know them so well, is the hardest part of running a sanctuary. To honor them, the Refuge is creating a memorial area for past residents. Lenore shares that compassion fatigue and work-life balance are also difficult issues for many doing sanctuary work. Now that the Refuge has its first staff animal caregiver, Lenore prioritizes making the work sustainable - it seems she is also an advocate for the human animals in her midst.

What makes all the difficulties worth it? Lenore says her favorite part of sanctuary life is "seeing new residents come into their own", like the Refuge's newest resident, a stray goat named Ponty. He had been on the loose in town for 2 months. He was "a challenge to catch", at 84 pounds (though he should've been 125 pounds) and in threat of predators. When he arrived he was very shy and scared of people, but every day was a little more comfortable and showed more personality. Lenore says it's "very gratifying to create space where animals are comfortable and can be themselves. When we see that happening we feel like we're doing it right."

When I asked Lenore who her favorite animal is, she couldn't pick just one. She said Robby the Rooster (her first rescue) and I laughed when she told me it's because she's "known that dude for awhile." Lenore has spent so much time with Robby, that he taught her how chickens say "I built you a nest". Lenore also has a special bond with Coconut the sheep, who was rescued from a butchery and arrived pregnant. When Coconut had complications and was put on bed rest, Lenore "would spend a lot of time with her in pen, I knew she was going through a lot... we have a bond".

Needless to say, many animals since have found refuge at the Refuge. When I asked Lenore about her wish for the sanctuary and its visitors, she said that she "hopes they get a better understanding of who the animals are and appreciate them more." On tours "(we) talk about the atrocities, but also share (their) individual nature and all the things that make them unique and wonderful." She feels that this is the strength of sanctuaries in advocacy - to

allow visitors to meet animals “in a space where they are expressing their individuality” because “if we don’t know someone or understand a particular group, it is hard to care or have compassion for that group, people or animals.” These critical interactions are how we create individual change. This is the power of sanctuary.

We express our sincere gratitude to Lenore Braford, for sharing her journey with us, and most of all, for her dedication and amazing work on behalf of animals. Since its founding 8 years ago, the Refuge is now home to chickens, turkeys, sheep, goats, ducks, and geese. A recent successful Kickstarter brings the Refuge close to getting to work on a cow barn. In the meantime, they are breaking ground on a new education pavilion which will provide a unique space for their outreach programs. To learn more about Piedmont Farm Animal Refuge, visit <http://piedmontrefuge.org/>