

Inside a Pet Bird Rescue

Susan Friend, Williamsburg, Virginia

The article entitled "Pet Bird Rescue" by Stacey Ewell, which appeared in the July, 2004 issue of the Watchbird magazine, begs for a response from an informed insider. My name is Susan Friend and I am the former Executive Director of Safe House, Inc, Companion Bird Rehab & Retirement Center, a small parrot rescue which was ultimately based in Surry, Virginia. I'd like to use the aforementioned article as a launching point from which to address the issues of small parrot rescue maintenance. And I'd like to use Safe House as an example. Hopefully, this will offer readers some insight into why these rescues close and suggest that small rescues thrive better with public support, than with public criticism.

Let me begin by stating that the primary objective of Safe House was to pursue quality lives for parrots. Everything we did was for the good of the birds. We would not even take a bird we didn't think we could help. At the direction of Dr. Jean Eddy, our avian veterinarian, Safe House had a quarantine room and enforced a 30 day quarantine period for all incoming parrots. We had a 5-person board of directors. We sought accreditation from the Association of Avian Rescue Organizations (AARO) before they dissolved and were inspected by them twice – once in Williamsburg and once in Surry. Some of their board members included Bonnie Kenk, Diana Holloway, and Liz Wilson who were gracious enough to remain as Safe House's three honorary board members. We became incorporated with the State of Virginia in March, 2000. We had filed for 501 (c) (3) non-profit status in March 2000 from the IRS and were in our 5-year determination period

when we closed our doors. Safe House had a solid adoption policy requiring a potential adopter to attend an Avian Basic Care Seminar, pass a home inspection, fill out an adoption application, and pass the approval of an adoption committee before they could adopt. Before taking the bird home with them, Safe House required adopters to have at least three visits with the parrot of their choice. Payment of an adoption fee was also required. My former husband, Mike, and I checked on birds after they had been adopted and made ourselves available for behavioral counseling if needed.

With all those things going for us, to an outsider, it probably looked as

though everything was smooth sailing for Safe House. However, things are not always as they seem. Lack of funding was the biggest problem we faced and one I suspect that is common to many small rescues. This was not for lack of trying, however. Both Mike and I worked full time jobs, yet several weekends a month we attended animal oriented events, set up our booth and handed out literature. Our literature brochures included the latest information on avian care, information on Safe House, information on other avian welfare groups and complimentary copies of what we felt were the best avian publications. All of our brochures included forms to send in donations. They also



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included how the public could get involved by becoming members or volunteers of Safe House.

In addition to outdoor booths, Safe House joined a program at a local grocery store, aimed at giving money to local charities like ours. I placed an ad for Safe House in a yearly "who's-who" publication in Williamsburg. The newspaper where I work allowed me run an ad and a brief write-up on our rescue that included information for people who wanted to donate. Both local and national bird retailers donated bird food. Local bird breeders donated toys. The Tidewater and Richmond bird clubs invited us to speak and always supported us with donations and interest. Yet even with the outpouring of generosity from the public, we were always in need, often paying for Safe House expenses out of our own income.

A case in point involved Merlin, a 40 year old Amazon parrot who hurled himself at Mike as Mike was servicing his cage. Simply by reflex, Mike flung his arms up to protect his face, sending Merlin across the room. It was a terrible accident. Merlin was taken to an avian vet immediately. \$600.00 of *our own* money and a trip to an avian orthopedist later, Merlin's leg was as good as new. He was subsequently adopted and is now happily living the high life in Las Vegas. The point of this story, however, is that accidents happen – they can happen to anyone. And a lot of the time Mike and I reached into our own pockets to pay for things the Safe House birds needed. We never went to the bird clubs or anyone else to reimburse us for any of those expenses.

Another issue faced by Safe House, yet probably not realized by the public, was lack of space. Mike and I lived in a 1 1/2 story Cape Cod, with the entire upper floor devoted to housing the birds. We found we could keep approximately 30 birds comfortably. We reached that number quickly, however, and had to turn to our foster homes. Those filled up just as fast. Finally, we had to start a waiting list. All along, we employed our rule of never just outright agreeing to take a bird. We always offered behavioral counseling first. It was our belief that as long as the bird was not in an abusive situation, it would probably do better staying in its own home, once the owner had been given some guidance. Unfortunately, by the time an owner had decided to contact us, he was already at the end of his proverbial rope and didn't want to try any behavioral counseling. That parrot was coming to us or was at least put on Safe House's waiting list. Even so, Safe House tried to help other rescues when we could. We were contacted several times by Animal Control in various parts of Virginia and Maryland asking for our assistance in housing birds who had been seized from houses of animal collectors. Thus, we usually operated at full capacity. So many birds to care for leads to our next issue – lack of volunteers.

Safe House was originally located in Williamsburg, Virginia. From 1997-2000, we operated "unofficially."

When I saw Bonnie Kenk's book *How to Start and Maintain A Successful Parrot Rescue Organization* for sale in *Bird Talk* magazine, I ordered it, and Mike and I considered trying to become "official." Safe House got a P.O. box, and became an entity unto itself. I applied for our incorporation status and our 501(C)(3) status, as I mentioned earlier, in March, 2000. We eventually moved, in 2001, to an acre of land in rural Surry County. Because Surry can only be reached by a half an hour ferry ride across the James River from Williamsburg, this move cost us a lot of our volunteers. A handful stuck with us, for which I will be forever grateful, but the burden of the manual labor now fell to Mike and me. Just for the record, I would like to state that we had high hopes for Safe House with this move. It was in Surry that we housed the birds on our second floor and hoped to eventually build an outdoor enclosure for them. We hoped this enclosure would provide more space and the potential for free flight for them. Unfortunately, we were never able to save enough to do this. Mike and I spent our weekends driving to places across Virginia to pick up parrots. We finally wised up and had owners bring their birds to Safe House. This freed us up to set up more booths at street fairs. When we weren't doing that, we were holding Basic Avian Care classes at our local Recreation center. These classes were free and open to the general public but were mandatory for our potential adopters. And of course, there were the ever present duties of feeding, watering, bathing, socializing, and rehabbing the birds.

It is purely of interest to note that Hurricane Isabel hit our area in September, 2003. It sent a large tree through our bedroom. None of the birds were hurt, thank goodness, but the destruction to our property was remarkable. We had 27 trees down in our yard alone. Our power was out for nine days. Ferry service was cut off to the main land. We had no running water and had to use bottled.

Safe House closed its doors in December, 2003. Mike and I separated in the same month for reasons unrelated to the rescue. If I were to be completely honest, I'd have to say that in the final six months of the marriage, running Safe House and coping with the damage from the hurricane added extra stress to an already fragile relationship. I cannot speak for my ex-husband, but I "called it quits" with the rescue because the load became too heavy. I simply couldn't carry it any more. I was totally burned out. Which leads me to believe that if I had been better at delegating my responsibilities, perhaps the rescue could have survived. Although, in the end, there weren't many people left to delegate them to. That makes me think that if we had run Safe House as more of a business, instead of getting so personally involved, maybe it would still be around. That seems difficult, given that I was so emotionally affected by each bird who came into the rescue. Maybe that was my mistake.

What I have learned through my Safe House experience is not to be so quick to judge similar organizations.

You never really know what is going on in a person's — or a rescue's — life until you get to know them. And the people who run rescues are just that — people. That doesn't mean you shouldn't be cautious. I do think all rescues should be expected to follow guidelines of hygiene, have solid quarantine rules, adoption policies, charge adoption fees, and the like. But once a rescue has proven itself to be legitimate and it falls on hard times or seems to be struggling, I feel that is the time it needs the support of its public the most. If you get a phone call from a friend that the grass is too tall in a rescue's front yard, perhaps that is the time to call that rescue and ask if you can lend a hand. You just might be surprised how much the offer can mean to the rescue on the receiving end.

Finally, I'd like to say that for what ever reasons Safe House didn't make it, it wasn't because our hearts weren't in the right place. All in all, our pursuit of quality lives for parrots established 82 birds in loving, educated homes. The birds that remained with us when we decided to close our doors were placed with either people who had adopted from us before, friends who had birds that we knew to be good bird owners, or bird club members. Indeed, Safe House was a place where, in spite of all our mistakes, the birds' needs always came first. ❖

AFA Club Booth



Photo courtesy of Fred Smith

This is how Florida/Puerto Rico Regional AFA Director Fred Smith sets up his AFA booth at local bird marts and clubs. This man is a real worker for the AFA. His recent rescue efforts for hurricane victims was nothing short of Herculean.



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