

The News & Observer

NC couple building sanctuary to rescue pets and 'connect the vulnerable and voiceless'

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UPDATED JULY 12, 2021 4:54 PM



Tamara Lackey and her husband, Steve Lackey, are building Beautiful Together Animal Rescue and Sanctuary on 83 acres in Chapel Hill to house animals — those that would otherwise die in shelters — until they can find foster or permanent homes. COURTESY OF BEAUTIFUL TOGETHER

CHAPEL HILL, N.C. (AP) — Tamara Lackey always has had a soft spot for the vulnerable and voiceless in the world, and she's made it her mission to do what she can to help those in need.

That has meant raising money to renovate bathrooms in an Ethiopian orphanage, taking pictures to document the stories of homeless boys or rescuing sick animals from shelters.

Now, she's taking those efforts one step further with an ambitious plan to address North Carolina's high animal euthanization rate.

Tamara and her husband, Steve Lackey, are building Beautiful Together Animal Rescue and Sanctuary on 83 acres in Chapel Hill to help care for animals — those that would otherwise die in shelters — until they can find foster or permanent homes.

They also hope to offer equine therapy at a new barn as well as volunteer programs and programs for children in foster care.

“Our goal is simple: It's to connect the vulnerable and voiceless in ways that benefit us all,” said Tamara Lackey in an interview with The News & Observer.

The organization pulls animals out of shelters where they would be euthanized, provides care, tells their stories and finds volunteers willing to provide love and care until they can be placed with an adoptive family. They also provide foster families with free supplies to properly care for the animals.

They rescued their first animal from a shelter on Jan. 14. Since then, they have pulled out nearly 450 animals.

On the massive site off of Ford Road, several miles west of Chapel Hill town limits, a small blue shed currently marks the end of a long gravel driveway renamed as Sanctuary Lane. Tamara Lackey looks at a field and sees a horse barn and arena. With a scratchy patch of young pines, she envisions what will become a welcome center for volunteers and animals.

“The very first building, we’re going to put together a kind of meet-and-greet facility and a caretaker structure with two smaller animal structures,” said Lackey. “This way we can start right away having animals on the property and someone here to care for them.”

Ultimately, she sees the sanctuary as a way to help eliminate the need to euthanize abandoned animals.

North Carolina euthanized 27,031 animals in 2020, putting it in third place for states with the highest animal euthanization rates, according to data published by Best Friends, a national animal welfare organization.

“And that’s after California and Texas, which are significantly larger states, and we’ve vacillated between number one and number three for years,” Lackey said.

The way Lackey sees it, if just 2% of the 85 million pet-owning households agreed to foster an animal for one year, preventable animal euthanasia could end, making North Carolina no-kill state.

“Most people don’t know how bad it is; not that we want to spread terrible information, but we want to talk about the empowerment, the ways people can change things,” Lackey said.

A PASSION FOR THE VULNERABLE

The mission to rescue animals, while not new, is a twist on the original goal of the Beautiful Together organization. When the Lackeys founded it in 2014, they originally focused on supporting children who were waiting for adoption.

“A lot of the project work was in Ethiopia, and we’ve gone back and forth, gosh, like nine times. And we’ve also done some projects here in the U.S.,” Lackey said.



Two dogs play in a field where Beautiful Together Animal Rescue and Sanctuary will be built. The 83 acres in Chapel Hill will house animals until they can find foster or permanent homes. Tamara Lackey studio@tamaralackey.com

The majority of the projects were crowdfunded. Lackey would photograph the children and conduct interviews to share in the hopes of encouraging people to support programs and projects to improve others' lives.

“What I have found time and time again is that, if you can bring a story to people so that they can connect to it, they do care and they do give,” she said. “It’s such an amazing affirmation of how good people can be.”



Beautiful Together has worked to support children waiting for families in Ethiopia since 2014. One project included photographing boys living on the streets in Addis Ababa for Make Your Mark. Tamara Lackey studio@tamaralackey.com

In those early days of the organization, Lackey noticed a striking connection between homeless children and animals. While in Ethiopia, she helped Make Your Mark, a program bringing homeless children off the street, and saw boys huddling together for warmth near highway overpasses. “So they’re huddled together for warmth, and there’s all these stray street dogs and puppies that are curled up with them,” she said. “You’ll see like 12 boys and eight puppies. These puppies follow the boys around because they’ll find food for themselves and the dogs, and they’ll snuggle up to them at night.”

But when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Lackey turned her attention to what could be done in the Triangle. She noticed a connection between foster children and animals and decided to establish a home base to further those



Beautiful Together plans on extending the pet sanctuary to include horses and donkeys, and to provide a facility for equine therapy. Tamara Lackey studio@tamaralackey.com

connections. With its myriad of possibilities, she said creating a sanctuary was the obvious answer.

“It started with me saying, ‘What if we started an animal sanctuary?’ and my husband being very supportive and passionate about it,” said Lackey. “We moved forward with getting the land and it kind of went from there.”

Not only will the sanctuary include a mobile spay and neuter facility and an ICU, but they plan to build a horse barn and arena that will allow for equine therapy. Lackey is dedicated to providing opportunities for children and adults to experience the emotional therapy animals can provide.

“If you’re bringing a lot of stress and energy, you get to physically see it in the horse, and so you have to calm yourself to calm the horse,” Lackey said. “It’s a way to bring awareness and mindfulness to the way you’re feeling. The same thing is true with a four-week-old kitten.”

The Lackeys, who have lived in Chapel Hill since 2003, have three children, including two adopted from Ethiopia and Ecuador. They are also currently housing 15 foster animals.

Tamara Lackey has seen the bonds develop between her own children and the animals she has fostered.

“My daughter just turned 16 and we had a dog stay with us for a couple days between foster homes, and she had a slumber party with him,” Lackey said. “Just him and her.”

Patty Caffrey, who serves as Beautiful Together’s Director of Communications, Networks and Partnerships, has fostered children and has also noticed that comfort level that quickly develops between them and the animals.



Ana Elisa Lackey holds a cat rescued from a shelter. Her mother, Tamara Lackey, is building Beautiful Together Animal Rescue and Sanctuary on 83 acres in Chapel Hill to house animals until they can find foster or permanent homes. Tamara Lackey studio@tamaralackey.com

“We’ve got great pictures of them watching TV, with the big dog cuddled up across their laps and, you know, it just makes them feel loved and safe. The animals really, really helped,” Caffrey said.

THE TEAM BEHIND BEAUTIFUL TOGETHER

The fact that the sanctuary team is made up of mostly women has opened up opportunities for multiple grants, including a matching grant for \$500,000. It was given by an anonymous donor whose only requirement was that the company remain women-run.

“So a half-a-million dollar grant is quite extraordinary, and the focus of the grant was just to build the space out,” Tamara Lackey said. “The donor has also been a wonderful advisor, as well.”

The company also recently qualified for Google’s non-profit status, which will give them some free advertising and access to Google platforms.

In addition to running Beautiful Together, Lackey is a professional photographer, a Nikon Ambassador, and the host for the PBS NC show “Chasing Frames,” which focuses on people who transform lives, protect the planet and rescue those in need.

She and her husband also own several other businesses, including Coco, a plant-based café in Chapel Hill.

“You know, Tamara is super inspiring, and very motivating,” Caffrey said. “She’s such an inspiration, and this just obviously means so much to her. You just can’t say no to her.”

Lackey attributes her success to her husband and to her team, who, she says, are overqualified and immensely dedicated.

“We have a really smart team, which I appreciate. It’s not just people who like animals, it’s very accomplished and intelligent people who are great at problem solving and brainstorming and have kind of a bigger picture of how we can all do this. It’s an impressive team,” she said.

The core team includes people like Farrell Carpenter, who was the Lacks’ real estate agent, and now works as the director of care giving support and customer relations, as well as Caffrey and Jane-Howard Crutchfield. Caffrey left her 20-year career in corporate America to join the team in March.

“My husband and I saw on Facebook the whole evolution of the land and knew that we wanted to be involved in some way,” Caffrey said. “Then I retired in March and decided to do this full-time.”

Crutchfield is a long-time rescue advocate, and helped Lackey in January when they first pulled a pregnant dog and seven 5-week-old puppies from a shelter. Crutchfield is a certified trainer and Animal Behavior specialist and is the Director of Dog Rescue Operation at Beautiful Together.

MEETING THEIR MISSION

Although the Lacks recently purchased the property, Beautiful Together has been placing animals in homes for several months. They are hoping to have the first building established within a year and broke ground on the project in May.

“We want to get the word out about this as much as possible because we need people who are supporting in a variety of ways, we want more people to open their homes to foster animals, we would love more animals to be adopted,” said Lackey.

Tamara Lackey has rescued hundreds of animals over the years, each with a story. She remembers Gracie, a shepherd puppy saved by Beautiful Together. A woman found the puppy in a Dumpster and brought it to the



Gracie, who was rescued after being found in a dumpster, is able to walk with help of a wheel chair Tamara Lackey studio@tamaralackey.com

organization, hoping to save it.

“She couldn’t use her back legs, and so someone just dumped her there,” Lackey said. The organization was able to pay for rehabilitation and shared Gracie’s story.

“Now she uses a wheelchair and just runs all around,” said Caffrey. “We found a woman who had a dog who couldn’t use his back legs when she was growing up, and she was really impressed with Gracie. And so they’re fostering her for a month to see if they can adopt her.”

Gracie is one of the success stories allowing Beautiful Together to make North Carolina a no-kill state, one pet at a time.

“It’s not just, how do you save them,” Lackey said. “It’s how do they save each other and what’s the impact on all of us. Because when they do, it’s pretty incredible.”