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## AROUND MOUNT DIABLO

### Tony LaRussa finds a home for animals -- besides his

[Demian Bulwa](#)

Bay Area baseball man Tony LaRussa, who lives in Alamo when he's not coaching the St. Louis Cardinals, was crazy for dogs as a child, but never was allowed to have one. His mother was no pet whisperer -- when she was a child, she had been bitten by a cat and had suffered through a series of just-in- case rabies shots. "I wanted a dog so bad," LaRussa says.

When he fell in love with his wife, Elaine, in his late 20s, he also fell in love with her poodle, Yvette, and her cat, Binkles.

Then came Evie. The stray kitten streaked the Oakland Coliseum during a 1990 game between the A's and the Yankees, and hopped into LaRussa's kitty- loving arms. After he found Evie a home, he and his wife founded the Animal Rescue Foundation to help other orphans.

Now things are getting interesting for the LaRussas (who currently have three dogs and nine cats at home). It has been three months since ARF opened its \$16 million, 37,700-square-foot center in Walnut Creek -- a shrine to all things canine and feline with lofty goals and a \$3 million a year budget.

Adoptions are up more than 350 percent, according to Brenda Barnette, the nonprofit's executive director, and ARF hopes to complete 1,200 adoptions this year after 435 in 2002. The goal is to eventually accomplish 3,500 adoptions per year.

The facility is worth checking out, even if you aren't looking for a new friend: It's the glossy combination of volunteerism, American retail marketing and celebrity-driven philanthropy. (For instance: On Nov. 8, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., baseball stars Albert Pujols and Dontrelle Willis will be signing autographs during an open house and memorabilia auction. Admission is \$5.)

Visitors will find adoption-ready dogs and cats in "condos" that would make some college students jealous. There are grooming and bathing rooms, and the place is virtually stink-and bark-free,

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thanks to thick walls and an air-exchange system. Cats have access to a giant room with a jungle theme, and dogs can train on an outdoor agility course or in the Nestle Purina Dog Training Pavilion.

There are conference rooms, education areas for kids on field trips, and a clinic primarily for spaying and neutering. The operators hope the facility becomes a destination -- "Like Alcatraz or the cable cars," LaRussa says, optimistically -- while its animals venture out into the community, to convalescent homes, jails and juvenile halls, and children's hospitals.

"It's a lot about presentation. It's marketing to save lives," Barnette said. "It's a whole lot easier to think about taking an animal home if they're not jumping around in a shelter. You're thinking, 'There goes the furniture.' "

Contra Costa County is also building a new shelter, a 37,000-square-foot, \$10 million Martinez facility scheduled to open by late January -- part of a larger building boom around the state in the past several years. While public and private shelters occasionally claw at each other -- often over some groups' claims that they are "no-kill," when they take on only adoptable animals -- county Animal Services Director Mike Ross said, "Every animal they (ARF) take out of our shelter is one we don't have to put to sleep."

In the early 1970s, roughly 46,000 animals were put to sleep each year in the county, Ross said. In 1983 the number was reduced to just over 21,000; a decade later it was 11,000; last year it was 6,479. The reasons: the snowball effect of low-cost spaying and neutering, educational outreach, and adoption efforts, including at ARF, Ross said.

"What you're seeing is an attempt, through building inviting shelters, to get people to understand what the mission is -- and to act more responsibly," he said.

Here's how adoptions work at ARF: Every week a specialist visits shelters in Contra Costa and around the Bay Area and the Central Valley, looking for dogs and cats that are adoptable but are out of time. "She looks for animals who want to interact with her," Barnette says.

Pictures of the animals are then posted online ([www.arf.net](http://www.arf.net)) starting Wednesday evenings, and they are available for adoption Thursday and Friday (2- 7 p.m.) and Saturday and Sunday (noon- 5 p.m.), at 2890 Mitchell Drive. Barnette recommends bringing every family member who is

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going to be around the pet.

There's one catch: After you've decided that an animal is right for you, ARF volunteers have to judge that you are right for the animal. Feel free to do a little personal grooming before stopping in.

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Pulling no punches: There was a time when Stephanie Moon would, while hovering over a fallen opponent, hesitate . . . before whaling on that opponent's face.

"Women aren't as used to contact sports," she says. "I had to get over punching somebody and feeling bad about it. I always used to say I was sorry."

Moon, a 32-year-old Martinez resident and a manager for a sign distributor, is a fighter. You wouldn't necessarily know it by looking at her -- she's 5-foot-4 and 125 pounds -- but she boxes, she kickboxes and she has a blue belt in Brazilian jiu jitsu.

This means she is part of the growing and controversial sport of mixed martial arts, criticized by some as "human cockfighting" and lauded by others as the purest, most effective form of combat. That also means that you don't want to fight her while standing or while on the ground.

After all, she knows a number of creative ways to snap one of your limbs.

But it's not easy being a female fighter. Sparring partners are hard to find, and paid fight opportunities are scarce. Moon's parents, meanwhile, would love to throw a retirement party. Once, during a traffic stop, a cop wanted to know whether Moon's black eye was caused by her husband. And some fight fans aren't interested in women for their takedowns and submission holds.

"There's people that would fly you all over the place to fight," Moon says. "Then you get there and find out you're going to be topless."

Yes, it's tough, but Moon loves to fight, and it has nothing to do with money (the most she has made in a fight is \$3,000) or even gender. She is one of thousands of people around the country who in recent years have taken up mixed martial arts -- a sport known for its Ultimate Fighting Championship in the United States, and for its ultra-popular and lucrative Pride Fighting Championships in Japan.

Studios have popped up all over the Bay Area -- in San Francisco, Dublin, Pleasant Hill, Santa Rosa,

and elsewhere -- and Moon trains with firefighters, cops, computer programmers and plumbers.

"It became a game of chess for my body," she says. "And there's a great camaraderie between women fighters because we have to seek each other out."

Growing up in Clayton, Moon was a gifted synchronized swimmer. When she runs into old pool mates and tells them about her new passion, they blow out their nose plugs.

It wasn't until 1996 that Moon took an aerobic kickboxing class in Pleasant Hill, and realized she liked the kicking more than the aerobics.

Moon has an overall record of 20-4 in fights. These have included boxing, kickboxing, Muy Thai kickboxing (kneeing and kicking to the lower body are allowed) and jiu jitsu. Three times -- twice in Hungary and once in an illegal underground tournament in San Francisco -- Moon has fought in "no holds barred" matches in which just about anything goes.

And something incredible happened to her along the way: She met and married Crosley Gracie, a 24-year-old black belt in Brazilian jiu jitsu whose international fighting career is just beginning, and who with a cousin operates the Dublin studio where Moon trains (check out [www.ralphgracie.com](http://www.ralphgracie.com)).

A fighter marrying a Gracie is like an aspiring politician marrying a Kennedy. The Gracies are the first family of mixed martial arts.

So what does Crosley think of his wife as a fighter?

"She's like Pine-Sol -- multipurpose," he says.

And they say fighters don't have soft sides?

*Demian Bulwa encourages reader reaction and story tips at [dbulwa@sfchronicle.com](mailto:dbulwa@sfchronicle.com).*

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Page E - 2



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