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From the Chicago Tribune

Sentimental tails

St. Louis Cardinals manager Tony La Russa let his soft side show when he and his wife founded the Animal Rescue Foundation

By Bonnie DeSimone

Tribune staff reporter

WALNUT CREEK, Calif. -- The gangly 2-year-old collie-shepherd mix looks equal parts wary and hopeful as the man eases into the room with her.

The dog's name is Kathryn. All the new arrivals at the Animal Rescue Foundation this particular week, animals that might have been euthanized by now were it not for ARF, have been given names beginning with K. Like many of them, this dog seems to sense it is auditioning for a new home.



The man has been around hundreds of abandoned animals. He considers them individuals with troubled pasts, and he knows the best approach is slow and gentle.

He reaches toward Kathryn, careful to let the dog see what he's doing. The dog's tail thumps against the floor. Gradually, the man's hand, a hand that has filled out 3,801 major-league baseball lineup cards, comes to rest on her forehead and works around behind her ears.

The dog is happy, and so is the manager of the St. Louis Cardinals. Tony La Russa won't take Kathryn to his home in nearby Alamo--he and his wife, Elaine, have three dogs, eight cats and no vacancies at the moment--but he knows someone will.

"Some of the best vibes I get on a daily basis are from my pets," La Russa said. "As soon as I walk through that door, I've got this rush of dogs and cats saying, 'Dad, man, I'm glad to see you home.'

"When you look over at your dog or cat and sit down and they come over and jump in your lap, there are moments where you get this sense of well-being and peace and happiness."

That personal connection led La Russa and his wife to found ARF 12 years ago, using La Russa's high-profile platform and the goodwill of fellow sports luminaries to further their chosen cause.

ARF's primary mission as a "no-kill" shelter is to give animals that would have been put to death elsewhere the guarantee of life as valued companions. It is a category in which La Russa could set some impressive save records.

His pet project has grown from a scrappy little volunteer group to an organization with a full-time staff of 35 and a \$3 million annual budget.

In August the non-profit agency moved into a newly constructed \$17 million, 37,700-square-foot building that houses the shelter, a spay-neuter clinic and space for obedience classes and community programs in humane education. More than 600 animals have been adopted out of the new location.

The shelter may be the only one in the world that hosts baseball-card signing shows, has original

LeRoy Neiman artwork on its walls and includes a sports memorabilia display featuring shoes autographed by Michael Jordan and Martina Navratilova.

But Exhibits A through Z are the animals themselves, who reside in the canine and feline equivalents of temporary executive housing --spacious, clean, well-lit rooms that are a distinct upgrade from the cages at most pounds and public shelters. The idea is that people will be more apt to visit and adopt animals if the facility is pleasant.

The La Russas, who have donated more than \$1 million to ARF, also put in long hours at the agency during the off-season. Tony squeezes in whatever appearances, fundraising and administrative work he can during the baseball season.

He considers the work part of a lifestyle, a set of philosophies that sometimes sets him apart in his day job. La Russa inhabits clubhouses stocked with avid carnivores and hunters, yet he is a vegetarian with a strong antipathy toward killing for sport. He not only brakes for animals but will stop his car and get out to scoop up a stray.

Cardinals third baseman Scott Rolen, who occasionally brings his dogs Enis and Emma to La Russa's office in the St. Louis clubhouse and watches the manager crawl around on the floor with them, says La Russa's tender touch with animals is an interesting contrast with his professional image.

"When you watch Tony on the field, there's certainly no compassion," Rolen said. "He's as competitive and driven as any manager in baseball. Winning is everything to him.

"The similarity is that his drive and intensity carry over to what he's doing now with ARF."

La Russa, 59, says the way he manages men has something to do with the respect he accords other species.

"Most of what I do, I learned from baseball," he said. "But I know part of how I react personally in those relationships is definitely influenced by my association with animals. I hate to even try to describe what it's done for me. I just know it has an influence.

"When Tony Phillips played for me in Oakland, he once said, 'Managers treat us all like dogs.' I told him I don't treat any player as well as I treat my dogs."

Just kidding. Sort of.

Aversion to killing

La Russa grew up loving animals but never had a pet of his own. His mother, who underwent painful rabies shots for a cat bite when she was a child, developed a phobia about animals and wouldn't have them in the house. Young Tony had to content himself with befriending other people's dogs in his neighborhood in Tampa.

When he was 13, a pal handed him a BB gun and persuaded him to aim it at a sparrow sitting on a chain-link fence.

"I know this sounds made-for-TV, but ... I shot this sparrow right in the chest--boom--and killed him," La Russa said. "I saw that bird go down and I felt so crappy. Just sincere disappointment with myself: 'What did I do? That's terrible. Poor, innocent little bird.'"

Thus began La Russa's aversion to killing animals for any reason. He doesn't hide his feelings from his players or peers, such as Texas Tech basketball coach Bob Knight, an avid hunter, but he doesn't preach either.

"There's a lot of good-natured kidding back and forth about how I hug trees and Bambi," La Russa said. "Guys will have their hunting magazines in the clubhouse and I'll walk by, tear 'em up and throw 'em in the trash. Guys will hide them from me. We have some fun with it. But this is America, and America is freedom of choice.

"Most of the time these guys are pretty ingrained by the time they get to our club. They were introduced to it as kids, by their dads, probably, and it's a part of their lives. Coach Knight says since our friendship, all he shoots is birds. That's what he tells me, and he says it's a public service to rid the world of bird [droppings]."

La Russa signed a baseball contract the night he graduated from high school and for years was

too rootless to have a pet. He acquired his first dog and cat through marriage.

"I know that's why he married me," Elaine La Russa says wryly.

Over the years the La Russas and their two daughters have maintained a menagerie of as many as a dozen animals at a time.

All of the animals have interesting backstories. Eddie the long-haired cat was found wedged under the hood of a car. Rez, an energetic Lab-terrier mix, wandered into the A's Phoenix area spring training camp a decade ago, filthy and flea-infested. La Russa got him cleaned up and intended to find the dog a home, but instead found himself in a pet store buying a collar.

"When that happens, he's yours," La Russa said.

Leia, a half-blind, half-deaf, often incontinent poodle discarded by a circus, wears a doggie diaper that LaRussa is not too proud or too macho to change when necessary.

But it was a feral calico cat in the Oakland Coliseum that led the La Russas to start ARF. During a Friday night game against the Yankees in 1990, the cat ran onto the field, stopping play. It eluded capture as it sprinted past the outfielders and tried to claw its way up a padded wall.

Finally, the cat arrived in front of the home dugout and encountered La Russa at the top of the steps. La Russa clucked reassuringly. The cat gave him a wild-eyed look and darted inside.

La Russa made sure the cat was taken to a local public shelter, but his wife, who had seen the cat's panicky dash around the field on television, couldn't bear the thought that it might be put to sleep in a matter of days. She made a round of calls but couldn't find a local shelter that had a no-kill policy.

She eventually helped place the cat in a private home, and the couple began to talk about how they might do something concrete to contribute to animal welfare.

ARF is part of the burgeoning "no-kill" movement and reflects a national trend toward shifting the burden for animal welfare to private, philanthropic groups as municipal and county budgets grow more strained.

It isn't a public drop-off center. Most of ARF's animal tenants are picked up from shelters in Contra Costa and surrounding counties after their waiting period, usually five days.

The number of animals euthanized nationwide has plummeted from about 23 million in 1970 to 4.2 million today, according to Rich Avanzino, director of Maddie's Fund, a foundation that awards grants to private animal-rescue operations.

"A lot of things are converging," Avanzino said. "There is a growing commitment to the importance and values of companion animals, and billions are being spent on their health and welfare. Concurrently, there is less acceptance of animals being killed. ARF is a national leader in our cause."

Animal People magazine editor Merritt Clifton said ARF is the fastest-growing agency of its kind in the country. Clifton, who compiles an annual watchdog report on animal charities, said rapid expansion led to some glitches in the middle to late '90s. At one point, he criticized the agency for operating a revenue-generating driver-education school (since sold) because it was not consistent with ARF's mission.

But the June hiring of executive director Brenda Barnette, who had held a similar position with the San Francisco SPCA, quelled any doubts Clifton and others might have had about ARF's future.

"On the whole, the rocky parts are behind them," Clifton said. "They're doing a lot of good work."

Barnette hopes ARF eventually will oversee as many as 3,000 pet adoptions annually. Earlier this month Kathryn, the collie-shepherd mix, became another successful statistic. She went home with a single mother whose three teens like to hike and match up well with the dog's energy level.

Rescuing people

In ARF's early days, La Russa often was put on the spot by people asking an obvious question: With so much human suffering, how could he justify devoting so much time and money to

animals?

It was disconcerting, even for a baseball manager accustomed to having his every move second-guessed.

La Russa read research that showed behavioral differences in people raised with pets and studies about pet therapy. He became determined to make ARF a place where, as the agency's credo puts it, "animals rescue people" as well as the other way around.

Among ARF's outreach efforts is a program that sends dogs and cats for visits with senior citizens or disabled people who love pets but are unable to care for them. Low-income pet owners are assisted with pet food and veterinary care.

In one innovative program, teen girls at a juvenile offenders home, Contra Costa County's Chris Adams Center, are paired with cats that need to be "socialized" before they are suitable for adoption.

Supervised by county and ARF staff members, the girls work with cats housed at the center over a period of 12 weeks. Sometimes they simply try to coax the animals out of hiding and into their laps. Other cats are encouraged to eat treats from their hands or play with toys.

The synergy between the girls and the abandoned, often abused cats is obvious. The girls keep notebooks on the cats' progress and their own as part of their treatment. Many say they feel they acquire patience and self-esteem through the process.

At ARF's grand opening party early in December, a teen named Renata read a letter she had composed about what the program meant to her.

"It helped me set boundaries," she read aloud. "I know this cat isn't mine, and I accept that. I feel very accomplished knowing I helped cats be adopted and live healthy lives."

ARF's Web site includes statements on a variety of animal-rights issues, including hunting, zoos and the fur industry; the use of animals in research (the group is opposed to it, down to and including dissection in school biology classes), and the purchase of chicks or bunnies for Easter.

But LaRussa doesn't like to describe himself as an animal "activist," preferring the term "rescuer." He is candid about his desire to keep ARF in the mainstream, which makes it easier to raise money and solicit corporate support.

"Many times the only way you can get attention is to be vocal," he said. "I just think you have to stay away from doing something illegal. Sometimes animal activists will go in the direction of illegality or extremes that are counterproductive, and I just don't think it's smart."

La Russa knows there will always be questions about his priorities, but his conscience is clear. At the moment, his chief concern is the final \$6 million loan on ARF's new building that comes due next year.

In addition to an annual "Stars to the Rescue" benefit gala in January that attracts a bevy of celebrity athletes, actors and musicians, La Russa is working on a fundraising strategy that will play off his recent milestone of managing 2,000 major-league wins (he finished the 2003 season with 2,009).

"One thing baseball and sports has taught me is any of the most ordinary of us--and I'm so ordinary it's ridiculous--can chase a big dream," La Russa said. "But you've got to have that big dream. You've got to have it and be willing to chase it."

La Russa, Baker share their love of animals

WALNUT CREEK, Calif. -- When last seen in an acrimonious Cubs-Cardinal series in early September, longtime friends and fellow Bay Area residents Tony La Russa and Dusty Baker weren't getting along so well.

But their joint love of animals is part of why their relationship will survive, La Russa said.

Baker dotes on his German short-haired pointer, Bailey, saying during the season how much he missed the dog, who remained at home in California.

"That's one reason I like Dusty," La Russa said. "As we agree, Dusty's for his team and I'm for

the Cardinals. And our friendship can never get in the way of that. As long as we put that aside, we're friends."

Although Baker parts ways with La Russa's views against hunting, Baker has helped La Russa raise money for his Animal Rescue Foundation.

As for the next time the teams meet, La Russa said he expects more than the usual hype.

"People are going to try to stir things up," he said. "It's going to be enough that they're trying to win and we're trying to win. It really would be better for the game and for this great rivalry if we just compete as hard as we can and not take the bait and not let this thing get ugly."

-- Bonnie DeSimone

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