



Scam in a Can?

The history of an elaborate con should serve as a warning to animal welfare groups

BY JANET WINIKOFF

“Please help me and my suffering friends,” read the sign taped to a donation canister in a Vero Beach, Fla., convenience store.

Complete with photos of pitiful-looking animals, the canister solicited donations to a group calling itself National Animal Medical Care and Birth Control Inc. (NAMCBC). A few blocks away, a gas station had an NAMCBC coin bank with a sign pleading, “You hold the key to my freedom,” while the NAMCBC canister in a nearby Chinese takeout reminded customers that “Even man’s best friend needs a friend.”

In 2007, it was hard to walk into a South or Central Florida pizza parlor, tanning salon, discount store, dry cleaner, flower shop, or gas station without seeing an NAMCBC canister right next to the cash register.

A photocopied flier was attached to most of the canisters, listing the charity’s numerous concerns: pet overpopulation, spay/neuter, teaching children not to approach strange dogs, and helping pet owners cope with financial hardship. “We are a new non-profit organization and our goal is to have all dogs and cats spayed and neutered,” read the first page of the flier. The flip side addressed a separate topic. Headlined “Children at Risk: Dog Bite Warning,” the text briefly discussed dog bite prevention and then jumped back to discussing spay/neuter and animal neglect. The text was paired with a photo of three puppies.

To a hurried, sympathetic customer fumbling with the change from a purchase of coffee or a paper, the NAMCBC canisters gave the appearance of legitimacy.

Yet anyone calling the listed phone number received a perplexing explanation of how the organization actually helped companion animals. Some callers seeking help with veterinary bills were told they could pay the doctor up front and then mail the receipts to NAMCBC for reimbursement, but that the amount reimbursed would depend upon how much money NAMCBC generated from its donation

canisters. Other callers were told they could send their veterinarian’s estimate to the group and would be reimbursed whatever amount the organization could afford.

Who was behind NAMCBC? Local shelters and animal welfare groups were mystified.

“To this day I’ve never met anyone who said they were either staff members or volunteers with that organization,” says Joan Carlson-Radabaugh, who in 2007 was the executive director of the Humane Society of Vero Beach and Indian River County. Carlson-Radabaugh had become suspicious about the group after hearing from colleagues in New Jersey about a slew of animal charity scams.

Less than two years after the canisters appeared, NAMCBC’s phone was disconnected, the website was abruptly taken down, the organization’s office was vacant—and the canisters and money were gone.

Tracking the Cans

Florida business records list Linda Lowe, Daniel Sutton, and Susan Meyer as NAMCBC officers, but the organization is also connected to a couple with a lengthy criminal past, Russell and Margaret Frontera.

Shopkeepers throughout Florida identified Russell Frontera from photos as the main person who dropped off and picked up NAMCBC’s donation canisters. Many gave similar accounts of his pitch. “The man just came in to my store and asked if he could leave [the donation canister] on the counter,” says Vero Beach businesswoman Mary McDevitt. When McDevitt, a shelter volunteer, probed the man for information, he bristled. “He told me that if I didn’t want the canister, he’d just take it and leave,” she says.

Reporter Adam Neal pushed for information about the group, but was never able to get a face-to-face interview with any representative. A woman identifying herself as Linda Lowe answered Neal’s questions over the phone. She said she was president of the NAMCBC and that her



only connection to Russell Frontera was that her mother and Frontera's wife were friends. She acknowledged that Frontera lived in her residence, but denied that he had any connection with NAMCBC.

It's commonplace for animal advocates to network with one another, but everyone affiliated with NAMCBC was off the radar where local animal welfare groups were concerned.

"No one at our shelter had ever heard from them, and attempts to talk to them weren't fruitful," says Frank Andrews, executive director of the Humane Society of St. Lucie County in Fort Pierce, Fla.

Eighty-five miles away in Sebring, Fla., former Humane Society of Highlands County board president Barbara Shrewsbury also saw red flags.

"We didn't know anything about [NAMCBC] until we started seeing the canisters around town," she remembers. "They would never answer the phone, and would only call back after I'd left a message." Shrewsbury got a call back from a volunteer calling himself "Danny," who became terse when she asked how his charity helped animals and how its finances were structured. "When I asked him for his financial statement he said [the NAMCBC] was 'too new.'"

Shrewsbury says she contacted several of the doctors listed as participating veterinarians on NAMCBC's website. None claimed any affiliation with NAMCBC. When Shrewsbury confronted "Danny" about this during a phone conversation, she says he told her that it was their right to put whatever they wanted on their site.

In early 2008, Neal's front-page story in the *Indian River Press Journal* and several other Scripps papers across Florida revealed that the cans looked exactly like those from two animal charities shut down by the state of New Jersey—one of which was started by Russell Frontera's sister, Josephine Thornton. NAMCBC changed the look of the canisters after the news broke, but after two follow-up stories, the canisters were all but gone, picked up by NAMCBC representatives.

In May of 2008, Russell Frontera—the man Lowe had claimed had no affiliation with NAMCBC—was arrested in Brevard County, Fla., for possession of a weapon by a convicted felon after police spotted him in a car ripping open NAMCBC donation canisters with a knife. The arresting officer, Sgt. David Baker, says that Frontera had materials in the car to put together new coin banks.

The weapons charge was dropped, but seeing Frontera in action was a sobering experience for Baker. "It makes me personally angry when good people give money and it's not

used to help," he says. "Now I tell people to never, never put money in those coin banks."

A History of Deceit

Florida hadn't been the Fronteras' first stop. Russell Frontera's criminal history includes a 1979 conviction for weapon possession, and 1982 convictions for assault after threatening to kill a teenager and a disorderly person's offense resulting from a charge of sexual abuse. A former gas station owner, he was also convicted of using stolen credit cards to defraud Exxon and 14 filling stations of \$7,500, charging more for gas than advertised, and selling stolen and altered auto inspection stickers.

In 1991, the Fronteras branched out into canister philanthropy, scattering 4,500 donation cans throughout New Jersey for an "AIDS Research Foundation." In 1993, according to the *Bergen Record*, a New Jersey superior court judge shut down the organization when the attorney general's office accused it of distributing less than 3 percent of the \$270,000 it had collected. The state also dissolved another charity Russell Frontera was running, the "National Foundation for Abused Children, Inc."

Frontera signed a consent agreement with the state prohibiting him from doing any charity work for five years and requiring that he register with authorities should he resume a career in fundraising.

"His operation shows how virtually anyone can create a charity and collect money for a popular cause, tapping donors who want to help but don't know which groups perform valuable services and which don't," wrote *Bergen Record* reporter Susan Edelman.

One year later, authorities caught the Fronteras depositing canisters for their "Puppy and Kitty Rescue" throughout New Jersey. Although the small print on the canisters stated that the group was a for-profit operation, the couple was ordered to remove the donation boxes and account for all the cash.

Deputy attorney general Deborah A. Young called the operation "a blatant attempt to circumvent" the judge's orders. "The chameleon may have changed color," she told the *Bergen Record*, "but this has not changed the fact that cash is being solicited from benevolent members of the public who have been misled into believing they are helping support a good cause."

A Family Affair

In 2002 Frontera began serving a seven-year prison term in New Jersey for wrongful credit practice, or loan-sharking.



Margaret Frontera was also convicted and but received probation. Released after three years, Russell Frontera hooked up with the Lovers of Animals Organization (LOAO). The now-defunct Tom's River, N.J., nonprofit was headed by a woman identified as Russell Frontera's sister, Josephine Thornton. LOAO used both donation canisters and phone solicitations as sources of revenue. The organization operated out of Thornton's home and used a local UPS Store as its mailing address. (Kevin Dean, listed as LOAO's vice president, was later listed as the owner of NAMCBC's Web domain name.)

In 2006, LOAO was shut down for multiple violations of New Jersey's Charitable Registration and Investigation Act and state charity regulations. Judge Peter Doyne authorized the state to immediately impound LOAO's canisters. A 2006 *Bergen Record* article reported on the civil suit, in which the state alleged that "(Russell) Frontera and son Dominic have been the primary individuals responsible for the collection of the LOAO's canisters." Frontera denied involvement and commented that his sister's accountant had mistakenly put his name on the group's official documents.

Within a year of LOAO's closure in New Jersey, NAMCBC canisters began popping up across Florida, printed with sad photos and catchphrases identical to those used by LOAO. Some of the Florida canisters even had the old initials still scribbled on the bottom.

When reporter Neal asked NAMCBC president Linda Lowe about the graphics, she told him she had designed them herself from hundreds of photos received from pet owners. Asked why her graphics were identical to those Frontera had used in New Jersey, she said, "I'd have to get back to you on that."

With donation canisters distributed in at least eight Florida counties, Lowe claimed that the organization had helped 60 pet owners. The Form 990 the group filed for 2007 lists revenue of \$3,896 and expenses of \$3,690, much of which, according to the form, went toward spaying and neutering.

Yet only one Floridian has come forward to acknowledge receiving financial assistance from NAMCBC.

As stories about the group began breaking, local shopkeepers were angry and felt duped. "Lots of people in our area refused to give the canisters back [to the NAMCBC representatives who came to collect them]," Shrewsbury recalls, adding that some people turned NAMCBC canisters over to her shelter.

Andrews, of the Humane Society of St. Lucie County, said many storekeepers felt bad that his shelter, which takes

in 10,000 animals annually, may have been cheated out of much-needed funding. "We got several calls from store owners asking if our shelter could put out canisters, to make [up for it]," he says.

Community Rapport is Key

It's not clear exactly how much money came in through the NAMCBC canisters, but at least 20 established animal shelters and rescue groups across Florida may have been impacted by the canister appeals.

The case should serve as a potent reminder to legitimate shelters and rescues to be aware of possible scams happening in their own communities. In the wake of the scandal, many wonder why so many stores displayed the canisters and why so many donors gave to an unfamiliar charity with no track record in their community.

"Tragic photos can catch people off guard, and they wind up giving from the heart and not from the head," says Sandra Miniutti, vice president of marketing for Charity Navigator, a nonprofit that evaluates the functionality and efficacy of charities. Even savvy people can be taken in: Two Florida detectives initially assigned to look into NAMCBC sheepishly revealed that they, too, had previously dropped money into the canisters, never once considering that it might be a con.

Your community's residents should know how your shelter appeals for funds. If you solicit by mail, conduct online fundraising, or distribute donation canisters, make sure the donation point can clearly be linked to your organization.

In New Jersey, Humane Society of Bergen County executive director Kathy Johnson remembers how local residents confused LOAO with her shelter. "There were a bunch of [the canisters] in our town. People started calling and saying 'When are you going to pick up your canisters?' We told them that they weren't ours, but people kept insisting they belonged to our shelter."

For their part, donors shouldn't assume that documents listing an address and phone number—or even 501(c)3 nonprofit status—mean that a group is living up to its promises. LOAO and NAMCBC both had all of these. "Do your homework," Miniutti advises. "Do some research before giving and find out exactly how an organization is using their money and what they are doing to make a difference," she says.

Even after LOAO was shut down, Johnson recalls that shopkeepers were in disbelief. "They kept pointing to the canisters and saying, 'But look ... they [LOAO] have an address!'"

While some may argue that organizations like the NAMCBC can't impact other groups, 500 canisters raising just \$5 a month could earn \$60,000 annually. The 1,500 canisters maintained by LOAO might have produced thousands of dollars. According to Shrewsbury, naïve donors make these scams worthwhile. "Don't just give to anyone who has a can out or hangs a sign. If they can't provide paperwork and you don't know what services they are providing, don't give."

Outraged at how LOAO had conducted itself in his home state, former New Jersey Assemblyman Neil Cohen stressed that legislation is the key.

"Phony charities will keep cropping up until we pass legislation outlawing the abuses associated with these charity-change charlatans," he said in a press release, adding "only then will we be able to donate our loose change to a cause without having to worry about whether or not we've just been robbed."

Don't let it happen to you. "Develop a close rapport with your community so that you can open conversations with them," advises Joan Carlson-Radabaugh. "Let people know about the good work your shelter does and encourage them to ask questions. If they know your organization is upfront, they'll expect the same of other groups." 

Author's note: This story is deeply personal. As someone devoted to animal protection, I was concerned that none of my colleagues within a 100-mile radius had ever heard of National Animal Medical Care and Birth Control, Inc. As a result, I began to dig, uncovering layer after layer of questionable practices—and got a threatening voicemail after simply asking questions about the organization. I turned my discoveries over to both local authorities and the media. If you suspect that an organization in your area is acting deceptively, it may be up to you to do the same kind of legwork.

A special "thank you" to reporter Adam Neal for taking on this story and following through, and to Joan Carlson-Radabaugh for telling me about the New Jersey animal charity under investigation for canister scams. It was this small but vital piece of information that helped me put the pieces together.

This should be a cautionary tale to animal shelters and their communities. After all, the next city hit could be yours.

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To hear audio interviews conducted by reporter Adam Neal with a woman identifying herself as NAMCBC president Linda Lowe, go to tcpalm.com/news/2008/may/21/port-st-lucie-man-linked-charity-type-scams-arrest.

Knowing is Half the Battle

Whether you're a large animal control agency or small shelter, it's important that you educate the public about common scams that can hurt your community—and possibly your shelter's good reputation. These are just a few that have popped up over the years; there are many other variations.

- **The "Free to Good Home" Scam** — Hustlers posing as caring pet owners answer "free to good home" ads, but turn around and sell the animals to research.
- **The Good Name Charity Scam** — Con artists create organization names that sound similar to those of legitimate national or local groups. They may add the phrases "humane society" or "SPCA" to bamboozle the public.
- **The Injured Pet Scam** — Someone calls a worried pet owner to say that he has found her missing pet, but the pet is injured and needs emergency care. The caller says that as soon as he is reimbursed, he will provide the name of the animal hospital where the pet is located. Upon payment, the owner is usually directed to a veterinary hospital that has never seen the animal.
- **The Trucker Scam** — A con artist claims he's found a missing pet while passing through your community and asks that money be wired before he will transport the animal back.
- **The Placement Scam** — Hustlers answer ads placed by pet owners trying to find a home for a pet they can no longer care for. Claiming to be a no-kill shelter, they offer to take in animals for a fee, and assure them a good home. Victims of this scam lose their money, and the pet is often abandoned or sold for research. These scams were prevalent in California during the early nineties.
- **The Nigerian Puppy Scam** — Scam artists send out Internet ads or place local newspaper classifieds, advertising either purebred animals for sale, or mixed-breed animals who must be adopted immediately but require advance shipping or adoption fees. People send their money, but the animal never arrives.