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
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.

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.
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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.

Janet Winikoff is the director of education for the Humane Society of Vero Beach and Indian River County, and has worked in the field of animal protection for 17 years. She shares her home with husband Mike, cat Tony, and dog Nala.

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.