

An Unfolding Storyline

How a veteran reporter lost her job and found her calling helping animals

by KETZEL LEVINE



SCENE ONE:

WHEN THE NEWS WAS ALL BAD

It was the worst of times. Period. After a 30-year association with NPR, having earned my wings as a senior correspondent, I was laid off. Wings clipped. The same day, five dozen of my wonderful colleagues were also let go in a carefully synchronized maneuver all too common in this take-no-prisoners economy.

The layoffs came fast and the subsequent shock left me numb. The numbness was a blessing. Until it wore off.

Millions of us in this country have had our jobs eliminated, perhaps even you. I can't

shake the image of our clipped wings and tailspins as each of us reacts to the fall. Some of us land softly, perhaps relieved the threat of job loss is over. Some of us go into free fall; my heart breaks for those falling still.

What we've all likely experienced is the most innocent of questions prompting the toughest of answers: "Well, what is it you really want to do?"

My reaction used to be unkind. "I was doing it!" I'd spit and growl. More than a year of deep mourning had to pass before I could imagine *wanting* anything.

Then, several months ago, I decided to

shake up my Etch a Sketch, as one friend called it, referring to that baby-boomer game where you doodled a drawing, gave it a shake, and the whole thing disappeared. I didn't want to wipe out my life, of course, but it was certainly time for a change. I decided to travel.

I chose Ecuador because I knew nothing about it and have always loved the possibilities inherent in the unknown. A friend who knew I was already learning Spanish recommended a language school in the colonial city of Cuenca. During the inevitable Google search, I also stumbled onto



As HSUS rescuers worked with the Louisiana SPCA and other organizations to save thousands of animals in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Ketzal Levine was on the scene to report the story for NPR. “A picture like that,” she asks, “what does it do once in your brain?”

one of the country’s few animal shelters, mere blocks from the school.

“Done,” I said. Mornings studying, afternoons scooping poop.

SCENE TWO: NAVIGATING A WORLD OF NEED

Cuenca is a cobblestoned city with enormous charm. It also has desperate pollution, standard fare for a once-small Latin American city now overrun by traffic and liberal attitudes toward exhaust. The noise is deafening, and why not? Honking’s just another kind of street talk.

For all those reasons, I couldn’t live in the center of the action. Instead, for my three-week stay, I settled in at a deliciously ramshackle B&B outside the city, walking the few miles to and from downtown. And that’s how I got to know the local street dogs: the Rasta-haired terrier mixes, the skinny, long-legged hounds, the happy packs of Mutts and Jeffs racing between cars. They’d have nothing to do with me, but I warmed to them quickly. Stray dogs are my fixed destination wherever I go.

As a fellow animal lover, you may be the same way. You’re vacationing abroad in a place with strays, and before you know it,

you’re doing your Lady Bountiful thing and handing out gifts of food. Stay one day too long, and suddenly you’re paying for veterinary care; get attached to a particular dog, and there goes the vacation (and the needs of everyone else!) as your focus shifts to the forms and shots needed to bring your new friend home.

I’ve always stopped short of buying that second plane ticket, but I’ve befriended many a homeless dog. I’ve greeted them in Cape Town, fed them in Costa Rica, worried over them in the streets of Brazil. I’ve managed to place a few with local families and have since added their pictures to my “foster kids” file, one that’s dominated by intractable hounds thanks to my friends at Cascade Beagle Rescue here in my hometown of Portland, Ore.

Overall, though, my involvement in the field of animal rescue has been peripheral—miniscule, really, when compared to the world’s inexhaustible animal advocates and selfless volunteers. I worked among several of them while in Cuenca, cuddling puppies, bathing beauties, and always, stooping to scoop.

As in many so-called “developing” countries, Ecuador’s animals have a tough

life. I was particularly undone by the street vendors standing in lunchtime traffic, passing puppies into cars for a closer look as if they were selling cheap bling. I was appalled the first time I saw them and carried on like a madwoman. I now see that my behavior was very “ugly American,” showing a lack of respect for a culture that was—gasp!—different than mine.

Outrage is easy. Doing something is hard. Even right here at home.

SCENE THREE: BEARING WITNESS

Part of the trade-off in working for mainstream media is maintaining political neutrality. Unless I was on assignment, I could not personally attend rallies or fundraisers while working at NPR. I could not sign any petitions, make any charitable gifts, or advocate for any organization that might compromise my objectivity or suggest that NPR endorsed it.

On the other hand, I could advocate for stories that I felt mattered. And that’s how I got to New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina. I can still conjure up the chaos, urgency, and volunteer spirit as I witnessed the most heartbreaking and heroic animal rescue operation in American history.

As you’ve likely read, a great deal of the drama took place at a large fairground north of the city. The stage was the Lamar-Dixon Expo Center, where The HSUS, the Louisiana SPCA, and other organizations sheltered thousands of animals during six weeks of emergency operations. Dogs in horse stalls and temporary kennels, cats stacked in portable crates, all saved from starvation, abandonment, and confinement—in other words, certain death. Nevertheless, the place was a heartbreaker, filled with listless felines, irritable terriers, and incredulous lonely Labs.

Of the many stories told and retold, here’s one that’s stayed with me. It was early evening, shortly after sunset, when I saw what seemed a mirage: a long line of pit bulls emerging from the distance, walking toward a destination I couldn’t see. Each dog was accompanied by a human in a slow-moving procession that could have passed for the two-by-two loading of Noah’s Ark.

In fact, the dogs were headed toward a

huge tractor trailer filled with wire crates. The truck was bound for Oklahoma, where local animal welfare groups awaited these tragically displaced dogs.

The scene itself was eerily quiet except for the hum of the refrigerated truck. That and the murmurs of volunteers, mostly female, kneeling beside their animals and stroking them softly while whispering encouraging words. One woman—her name was



Valentina León

Becky—was getting her faced bathed by an affectionate chocolate brindle pup. The dog was in heaven; Becky was in tears.

I haven't a clue what happened to any of those dogs. But a picture like that, what does it do once in your brain? Does it forge a new path through your neurons and forever change your thinking, or is it just a moment that touches your heart? For me, at the time, it was a poignant story to be told with appropriate detachment. And that's what I did.

SCENE FOUR: ANIMALS TO THE RESCUE

Fast forward to my stay in Ecuador, where my Katrina experience came howling back to me with all my professional detachment gone. Everything I'd witnessed in New Orleans resonated with all I was now seeing in Cuenca, along with my own commitment to animals and vegetarian principles over the last 40 years. No longer in mainstream media and free to pursue my own political agenda, I began to sense a certain inevitability about where I was headed: the great wide world of animal activism, including rescue, welfare, and animal rights.

A tad vague? Tell me about it. But who was I to argue? The signs were all there, including a meant-to-be meeting with a classical pianist and animal activist named Valentina León. Ms. León had created one of Ecuador's most impressive dog refuges through her organization, ARCA (Activism, Rescue and Conscience for Animals). From the get-go, I knew I wanted to work on ARCA's behalf. I also wanted to work with the Galapagos Preservation Society, an animal rescue group active on Ecuador's

Galapagos Islands, where feral dogs and cats were threatening the islands' one-of-a-kind species. And I had a vision of my own in a deep, green valley high in the Andes: a Colegio de Perros or High School for Dogs, where the brightest of strays would receive world-class training and compete with purebreds for celebrity cachet.

I still want to do all these things, and I've begun to help Valentina León.

Thanks to a few good people, I've recently raised a third of ARCA's monthly \$3,000 budget. It's a small amount that will do a lot of good.

Arguably, it's a first step. But honestly? I've no idea toward what. Nor do I have a clue how I'm going to earn a living as I pursue this oh! so lucrative field. Here I've put you through my job loss, taken you on

my search for meaning, and reported that I've seen the light. Next step in this hero's journey should be fulfillment, plus an inspiring tagline: Listen to your heart and do what you love!

Forgive me. I'm no hero. What I am is a middle-aged fledgling not at all sure what's beyond the nest. Sometimes it makes me sad, having once flown so high. Sometimes it makes me happy, feeling so new and free. Either way, right now, it's all about the flapping as I set out to again earn my wings.

► **FREELANCE WRITER** Ketzell Levine shares her Portland, Ore., home with three animal companions: Zoe Mae, the force of nature; Starlet, the ever-starving beagle; and Lulah, the perfect cat. Released from the chains of journalistic objectivity, she is fully enjoying her newfound freedom to sound off on whatever she pleases. Catch up with Ketzell at her blog, *Kickin' 'n' Screamin' to Vegan*, at ketzell.com.

HSI Brings Hope and Help to Ecuador

Cappuccino, a savvy shelter dog, wasn't going to let these girls get away at an August adoption event held by ARCA, Ketzell Levine's favorite charity in Cuenca, Ecuador. "They came up to the dog, and the dog jumped on their lap," says Humane Society International's Alexandra Rothlisberger, adding that the older sister is dropped off twice a week by her father to volunteer at ARCA's low-cost veterinary clinic. "They fell in love and ended up adopting Cappuccino."

As HSI's program manager for Latin America and the Caribbean, Rothlisberger helped conceptualize ARCA's first adoption fair, which drew media attention and featured bands, face painting, and distribution of information about responsible pet ownership. In a country with few shelters and large numbers of roaming dogs, organizations like ARCA are a relatively new but welcome addition; even passersby who didn't adopt dogs were excited by the group's ID tag offer, and one person wrote a \$500 check to ARCA on the spot. Next up, says Rothlisberger, are plans to provide continuing education to veterinarians at ARCA's clinic, started in 2008 with the help of funds from HSI.



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