All in a Day's

by Michael Sharp
JUST 24 HOURS EARLIER, Katie Jarl had been walking through the underground hallways of the Texas Capitol, meeting with legislators about a bill to protect sharks from the gruesome practice of finning.

Now The HSUS’s Texas state director stands outside a trailer home, helping rescued dog after rescued dog out of a hoarding situation and down an assembly line of sorts. She writes names on collars and places the animals in carriers for a ride to the Austin Humane Society. “It was,” Jarl says later, perfectly summing up the life of a state director, “going from a suit and heels at the Capitol one day, to rescue gear where I’m having to wear a hazmat suit the very next.”

That was the fall of 2012. Fittingly, Jarl spent the very next day driving six hours to South Padre Island, where she spoke about animal hoarding to a group of code enforcement and animal control officers. Sometimes, on such trips, someone will ask where exactly she’s based. She likes to answer: “Wherever the job is that week.”

The HSUS employs 45 state directors and hopes to soon serve all 50 states. They are tireless, passionate one-person outposts along the front lines, lobbying state representatives, assisting rescues, coordinating law enforcement trainings, helping shelters and so much more. They are often the first point of contact for someone suspecting a neighbor of animal abuse. They are often the last hope for an animal protection bill that might otherwise die quietly.

“I love this role, and I’m so passionate about animals, and it consumes everything,” says North Carolina state director Kim Alboum. “It consumes my life from the time that I get up to the time I go to sleep, but it’s worth every minute.”

Earlier this year, three state directors took All Animals along for the ride, sharing those valuable minutes through the Michigan snow, through late nights at the Virginia Capitol and through a lifesaving course at Penn State.
A veteran firefighter named Paul Phalon delivers the news, quickly changing the complexion of this spring afternoon.

A black quarter horse has somehow slipped down into a nearby ravine. He’s lying on his side, not moving. A veterinarian is supposedly on the way.

That’s where Sarah Speed now stands, working carefully. She helps fasten two straps under the horse’s belly and another against his chest as a team of rescuers hustles along the ridge to build a bipod structure: two long aluminum arms forming an upside-down V, from which a long rope is fastened onto the horse’s sling.

He is rising now. Slowly. “Haul on the elevator,” comes the call from the incident commander, and rescuers pull cautiously on the rope. As the horse is moved gently toward higher ground, Speed emerges from the ravine to grab hold of his lead rope, steadying his head.

Suddenly, a voice booms out: “Everybody to the bipod! Quick! “Photo op!”

This is just a drill—the final exam for this three-day large animal rescue training class on the grounds of Penn State University. The horse is just a lifelike mannequin named Lucky. Speed and her fellow trainees, now smiling for a group photo, have passed with high marks.

“All in all,” says Phalon, one of the instructors, “I’d say they did very excellently.”

Speed is here this weekend, her first away from her 8-month-old son Caleb, to strengthen her connections with county animal rescue teams and refresh her tactical rope skills. (Think knots and pulleys, hauls and lifts.) She’s a regular at such trainings now—a notion she never saw coming 10 years ago, as a first-year law student in San Diego.

“I didn’t know any of this existed,” she says, adding with a laugh: “I was a law student. I was a dork. I never played sports. Nothing.”

But then, she also hated law school. “Trying to make the best of a really terrible situation,” she joined the Student Animal Legal Defense Fund, which led her to a national conference where she learned about puppy mills and factory farming and circuses. She came home a vegetarian, and three months after taking the bar, she took the state director job.

Soon, she was immersed in a whole new world, volunteering for deployments with the HSUS Animal Rescue Team, taking every training course she could find: ropes, swift water, confined spaces, disasters, emergency sheltering, hazardous materials. She became a volunteer firefighter. She rappelled into a ravine to “save” a stuffed animal. She leapt into the Potomac River to “save” a colleague.

Two years ago, she took the first part of the large animal rescue training course, learning to handle animals such as llamas, goats, horses and sheep. That session soon paid off, as Speed assisted the Humane...
Society of the Harrisburg Area six months later in removing 24 horses from a hoarding situation.

The animals were locked in a paddock without hay or water. Several mares were pregnant. Several stallions had wounds from fighting. One horse had already died. But using her new skills, Speed helped load the horses onto trailers by building a chute out of fence posts.

“We were out of there in a couple hours,” she says. “Everyone thought it was going to take us multiple days.”

Now she’s back for part two.

Speed spends Friday afternoon in a classroom, learning knots and standard do’s and don’ts. Saturday morning, the class heads to a grassy strip alongside a campus barn, where they focus on three core skills: securing a horse mannequin onto a hard-plastic, sled-like rescue glide, devising a system of pulleys and ropes to pull heavier weights and anchoring that system into the ground or onto a truck.

The beauty of the class is that everything comes back to these three core skills, steadying rescuers who could become overwhelmed in a real-life crisis: “Take what you know,” Phalon says, “and start building on it.”

Along the way, the instructors—firefighters, animal specialists—share tips. Avoid using easily confused words like “go” and “no” at the scene of an accident.

Stay out of dangerous “strike zones” near a horse’s hooves and head. Minimize trip hazards.

They also present various scenarios. On Saturday afternoon, a horse mannequin is placed on his back against a wall of the barn. Speed oversees the job of tying him down to the glide.

“He is not sedated; he is unconscious, but my head team is keeping an eye on him,” she says, before directing responders to secure his hooves. “We’re going to hobble him, then we are going to put the sled underneath, then we are going to pull him onto the sled.”

For Speed, as much as this weekend is about prusik knots and pulleys, it’s also about building a rapport with county animal responders. In the wake of Tropical Storm Irene in 2011, for example, the Harrisburg Humane Society called to say its water supply had been contaminated. Speed used her contacts to reach the National Guard and worked with the humane society’s contacts in local government—and within hours, there was a water tanker on scene. “The state director’s most important role is that liaison,” she says.

Sunday, more practice scenarios unfold. Trainees deal with an overturned trailer. They build a bipod. They learn how to fasten two types of slings onto a patient horse named Jay.

The session concludes with the final exam scenario in the ravine. As Lucky rises out of the ditch—all the training paying off in one impressive bipod structure overhead—Speed turns from the ridge for a brief moment and yells down: “How freaking cool is this!! Right???”

The former law student is clearly in her new element, her skills refreshed for the next real-life scenario that will suddenly change the complexion of some random afternoon.

“I DIDN’T KNOW ANY OF THIS EXISTED. I WAS A LAW STUDENT. I WAS A DORK. I NEVER PLAYED SPORTS. NOTHING.”

– SARAH SPEED, PENNSYLVANIA STATE DIRECTOR
To be fair, Jill Fritz does give you a choice, as you saddle up onto the passenger seat of her rented Ford Edge outside Detroit Metropolitan Airport early one morning.

A snowstorm is bearing down on Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, she reports, the latest punch from a brutally cold winter that’s left the Great Lakes nearly 90 percent frozen over. So if you’d rather spend the weekend gathering signatures in slightly kinder climes, maybe in Lansing or Grand Rapids, that’s totally fine. There will be opportunities.

But asked what she’d do if there wasn’t a visitor shadowing her this weekend, Fritz admits to a guiding philosophy of, essentially: Just power through. In her cupholder is a big bottle of water. On the floor behind the front seats is a plastic bag filled with apples and energy bars. Onward you go.

“We’ll just see,” Fritz says, northwest of the city. “As you can see here it’s a tropical 33 degrees and nice and clear.”

Just 14 days remain to gather signatures for a critical ballot referendum that would enable voters to protect wolves and other wild animals in Michigan. So Fritz is heading north to Marquette, a small city along Lake Superior. Northern Michigan University is hosting an Indigenous Earth Issues Summit tomorrow, and Fritz plans to set up a table there.

This is actually the second ballot campaign in 14 months for the Keep Michigan Wolves Protected coalition. The first gave residents the right to vote this fall on whether wolves should be hunted—but the state legislature temporarily thwarted that by handing the state Natural Resources Commission the sole power to designate game species. In November, Michigan began its first official wolf hunt.

This second referendum now aims to give the power back to voters to decide which wild animals can be hunted. But qualifying again for the November ballot requires another 161,305 valid signatures by March 13—a task that’s been complicated by a brutal winter.

“Wolves are amazing animals. And beautiful. Absolutely vital to a healthy ecosystem,” says Fritz, who is worried the next hunt could allow trapping too. “But it’s not particularly just about wolves for me. It’s the utter lack of regard for science and for the wishes of the citizens of this state that has really galvanized me to fight this and to right this wrong.”

If the weather cooperates, it’ll be a seven-hour drive from Detroit to
Marquette. Along the way, Fritz makes a pit stop at the Cheboygan County Humane Society, which three weeks ago seized 38 dogs in a neglect case. Fritz drops off the latest issue of The HSUS’s Animal Sheltering magazine, plus posters advertising HSUS reward programs for dogfighting and puppy mill tips. She’s been wanting to see the shelter’s recent renovations, and in the new cat room she meets Frostie, who lost the tips of both ears after getting stuck in a snow bank.

In the kennels, she greets the rescued dogs, keeping a lookout for a red-hued hound who’d caught her eye in news coverage of the seizure. She’s encouraged to see he’s put on weight—and to hear shelter executive director Mary Talaske report that all the dogs are recovering. Before she leaves, Fritz offers to write the prosecutor urging strong sentencing and offering HSUS resources.

“Every state director has something they’re passionate about,” she’ll say later. “For me, it’s enforcing the law.”

The drive to Marquette stays relatively winter-weather-free, but later that night, the snow begins to roll in. The summit, though, goes on as scheduled.

“Hi, would you like to sign our petition to protect wolves in Michigan?” she asks again and again the next morning, as students, faculty and event-goers file past. More often than not, they do.

“Absolutely.”

“I’m down!”

“I would love to.”

Fritz is a member of the “Wolf Pack,” meaning she’s collected at least 658 signatures—one for each wolf in Michigan. But she’s blown away by what she’s seen from other volunteers. One used snowshoes to get out and gather signatures. Another fell outside her home, breaking her ankle. On the ensuing ambulance ride, she got the paramedic to sign.

By 1 p.m., Fritz has helped collect 44 signatures (representing 18 counties) and done an interview with a local TV reporter. Numbers-wise, it certainly won’t be the biggest day, but as Fritz notes, the outreach to supporters here on the Upper Peninsula is invaluable. “Just to let them know that we’re here for them,” she says, “and that they’re not alone.”

As she prepares to leave, an incoming text message advises that heavy winds have closed the Mackinac Bridge between the state’s two peninsulas. Fritz opts to brave the elements and take the long way home, around the Wisconsin side of a frozen Lake Michigan.

Typically, she powers through these long drives by blasting hard rock music. But for now she drives in silence. At one point, she gasses up—across from a snowmobile driver who is doing the same. She stops for a black bean veggie burger and later a double-shot soy latte. At each stop, she checks a steady stream of emails—from an animal control officer, a citizen worried about a potential puppy mill, a shelter worker asking about talking points for an upcoming TV interview about a bill to ban gas chambers for euthanasia.

Just shy of 10 p.m., the Chicago skyline rises ahead. And finally, around 1 a.m., she exits Highway 496, heading toward Lansing, toward home and her two shy cats, Stanley and Eric.

Thirteen hours from now, she’ll be back out at the Lansing Center, helping to collect more signatures at a large flea market. She’ll work alongside a volunteer named Maria who’s been “so upset about this situation I can’t sleep at night.”

But for now, the GPS is off. The homestretch is here. Fritz shows no signs of fatigue. “Pretty energized by the reaction of the people at that event in Marquette. It was so positive and so supportive of our campaign that it really gave me motivation to work even harder for the wolves.”

Update: On March 13, Fritz helped deliver nearly 230,000 signatures to Michigan’s secretary of state, more than enough to qualify the second referendum for the ballot. But opponents were preparing a competing initiative that could keep the issue away from voters. Says Fritz: “It’s a very critical time now for us to be talking to legislators about voting this very harmful legislation down.”
“Little girls dream about their wedding one day,” jokes Laura Donahue, camped out on a couch on the third floor of Virginia’s General Assembly building in downtown Richmond. Her computer on her lap, she is simultaneously answering emails and listening to a live feed from the floor of the state Capitol.

“I dream about a bill signing.”

Granted, there isn’t much time for dreaming these days (much less training for the half-marathon Donahue has marked on her calendar 38 days from now). Politics here is a sprint: The Virginia Legislature convenes for just 60 days this year, and it’s nearing the halfway mark—or “crossover,” as they refer to it in these hallways.

Bills have six more days to pass out of the House or Senate, or they’ll have to wait 11 months for the next session to convene.

Already, a multifaceted bill cracking down on puppy mills has passed the Senate 40-0. But two more bills hang in the balance: one allowing people who’ve filed domestic violence charges against a partner to obtain custody of their family pets, and one phasing out fox penning, where packs of dogs chase down and kill foxes in fenced enclosures.

Donahue is concerned the clock’s running out on the pet protective bill for a sixth straight year. Meanwhile, the fox penning bill faces its first test with a Senate committee hearing tomorrow. The expected vote is still too close to call.

Hours earlier, Donahue actually began her morning at the Richmond SPCA. The building is undergoing renovations, so as chief executive officer Robin Starr warned, there’s no office that doesn’t have a dog in it. “Well, that makes us feel at home,” Donahue answered, with a laugh. And with Lucky on a pillow next to her, Niblet sleeping under a desk and Charlie roaming the room doling out kisses, she and Starr discussed plans for an upcoming community cat symposium.

Donahue then hustled to the General Assembly for two quick meetings with lawmakers. The second of these was with new Sen. Jennifer Wexton, who will vote tomorrow on the fox penning issue.

“I’m grateful for this time with you,” Donahue began, before discussing the violent swing in public opinion against the practice, the disease risk, the study that showed nearly 90 percent of foxes in pens had died over a 20-month trial period. “This practice is unethical,” she said. “It has no place in our commonwealth.”

Now, as she sits on the third floor, her battle gets an unexpected boost: Donahue receives a call that the attorney general’s office is willing to take a public stance against fox penning. She heads to see Sen. David Marsden, the bill’s lead sponsor, to discuss. Then it’s off to meet with another senator and type up talking points for tomorrow’s hearing, all the while answering the usual deluge of emails.

Just after 4, as she waits to testify for a separate bill to increase penalties for gambling at fox penning events, she steals a moment to run home. Her 12-year-old terrier mix Samson has heart failure and needs medicine three times a day.

“Here comes the heart patient,” she
calls out, as he comes running from the back. “You’d never know it.” In the front room, Roscoe, a pit bull mix rescued during an Ohio dogfighting bust, peeks his head up from a chair. She takes the two for a walk. She refills their water bowls. With Samson in her lap, she pretends to speak for him: “Mom, you go back in that committee hearing, and you remember me.”

She’ll need the boost. She’ll be the lone person testifying for the bill; before the hearing, the orange hats of the opposition line two walls of the lobby. At dinner, as she continues the long wait to testify, she spots the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries director eating with several fox penning supporters. Back at the Capitol, as she finally stands to speak, Del. Jackson Miller throws a tough line of questioning her way.

“This is an example of urban and suburban Virginia, that knows nothing about this culture, about this heritage, forcing their views on people that’ve been doing this, and their family who’ve been doing this for hundreds of years,” he says later. “Hey, and that’s how democracy works, but it’s unfortunate.”

Several people clap. A couple say “Amen.”

The bill falls one vote short.

It’s after 11:30 when Donahue quietly leaves the General Assembly building. Clearly, the evening has left a bitter taste.

But less than nine hours later, she’s back at it, preparing to meet with another delegate when she gets a surprising email: The pet protective act, for domestic abuse victims, has been passed through to the House floor.

“The emotional swings during session,” she says, before drafting an email to supporters. “It’s huge. I’m stunned.”

Later, another lobby fills with orange hats—this time, though, most of them read “STOP Fox Penning.” After meeting with witnesses, Donahue makes her way through the crowd, handing out candy to supporters.

Throughout the hearing, on the main bill to end penning, Donahue trades texts with lawmakers. An hour in, assistant attorney general Michelle Welch delivers a key message, saying: “It is my opinion that the activity going on in these pens is running afoul of our animal fighting law.”

Several lawmakers push back. But Sen. Marsden—who agreed to join forces with Donahue during a meeting at Starbucks three years ago—closes his testimony by holding his arms out wide and asking the committee to consider the largest penning facility. He then begins moving them closer together, as if reducing all that acreage to a small dogfighting ring. “You tell me, when we shrink this fence, when it starts to become animal fighting …

“It is always animal fighting.”

The bill passes out of committee, 8-7. And while there remain no guarantees in the House, clearly a new momentum is building. “We have such an opportunity,” Donahue says, “to prevent so much suffering this session.”

Update: Two months later, she got her bill signing. Actually, she got three of them: Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe signed the pet protective, puppy mill and fox penning bills into law. In a compromise: No more fox penning licenses will be issued in the state, and all current ones will eventually be phased out. The legislation also limits the number of foxes who can be kept in the state’s remaining 37 pens.