

ANIMAL CARE & CONTROL TODAY



Fall 2026

A publication of the National Animal Care and Control Association

INSIDE

**REMEMBERING AND
HONORING
THE LIFE AND LEGACY
OF DAVID MARCANTEL**

**A DIFFERENT
KIND OF
FIELD WORK:**

*LESSONS FROM
THE FIELD*

**INTRODUCING THE
NACA TRAINING
INSTITUTE:**

*WE SET THE BAR,
NOW WE' ARE RAISING IT.*



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BECOME A
MEMBER!**

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Fall 2026

As the leaves turn and the air cools, we're excited to bring you our Fall 2026 issue! This season has been one of growth, milestones, and momentum for NACA and for the profession as a whole. From new certifications to important conversations shaping the future of animal welfare, there's a lot to celebrate as we head into the final stretch of the year. Grab a warm drink and settle in, we think you'll find plenty in these pages worth reading.



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Stay connected with NACA's Communications Committee for the latest updates, resources, and networking opportunities!

TORI FUGATE

VP of Marketing & Communications
Operation Kindness Humane Society



From the CEO

As I sit down to write this, I find myself genuinely overwhelmed, in the best way, by everything our organization and our members have accomplished this year.

2026 has been a year of real, tangible progress. We launched new programs, piloted others for the very first time, and took a hard look at how we deliver value to our members, ultimately rebranding and reimagining our training offerings to better serve this profession. We expanded access to certification, invested in new ways to support the wellbeing of the people doing this work, and made meaningful strides toward meeting our members exactly where they are. None of this was small, and all of it was intentional.

None of this happened because it was easy. It happened because so many of you showed up, again and again, for this work and for each other.

I want to take a moment to say something that doesn't always make it into a year-end recap: this work is hard. It asks a lot of the people who do it, physically, emotionally, and everything in between. The officers in the field, the shelter staff behind the scenes, the leaders holding it all together, you carry more than most people will ever fully understand. I see it, our board sees it, and I hope you know how deeply it's appreciated.

As we head into the holiday season, a time that can bring its own unique pressures for those of you still working through it, I want to ask something simple of all of you: please take care of each other. Check in on your colleagues. Offer grace when someone is running on empty. Celebrate the wins, even the small ones. And please, take care of yourselves too. You cannot pour from an empty cup, and this profession needs you at your best for the long haul, not just for one more day.

Thank you for everything you've given to this profession this year. I am prouder than words can really capture to call myself part of this NACA family, and I cannot wait to see what we build together in the year ahead.

With gratitude and admiration,

Jerrica Owen,

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER





FEATURE

INTRODUCING THE NACA TRAINING INSTITUTE

We set the bar. Now we are elevating it.

For nearly 50 years, NACA has led the way in training and certification for the animal care and control profession. That leadership isn't new. What is new is how we're bringing it all together.

This year, NACA is proud to unveil the NACA Training Institute, a reimagined home for everything we offer in training, credentialing, leadership development, and professional wellness. We didn't just want to keep setting the bar for this profession; we wanted to raise it and give our members a clearer, more connected path to reach it.

ONE INSTITUTE. FOUR COLLEGES.

RATHER THAN A
COLLECTION OF COURSES
AND CERTIFICATIONS, THE
NACA TRAINING INSTITUTE
IS NOW ORGANIZED INTO
FOUR DEDICATED COLLEGES,
EACH BUILT AROUND A
DIFFERENT PART OF WHAT IT
TAKES TO SUCCEED IN THIS
FIELD!



ONE INSTITUTE. FOUR COLLEGES.

Each college is built around a different part of what it takes to succeed in this field.



MODERN LEADERSHIP

The Foundation of Excellence: Mastering Standard Operating Procedures in Welfare

NACA Training Course:
Key Concepts & Resources



Certification Academy

The home of NACA's nationally recognized credentials for animal care and control professionals. From foundational certifications to advanced specializations, this is where officers and agencies go to earn the credentials that matter most in our industry.



Leadership Academy

Great agencies are built on great leadership. The Leadership Academy is designed to develop the essential skills needed to manage teams and guide animal welfare organizations, helping the next generation of supervisors and directors lead with confidence.



Organizational Health and Wellness

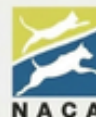
Because a strong profession starts with strong people. This college is dedicated to prioritizing mental health and organizational resilience, giving agencies and teams the tools to support their staff for the long haul.



EARLY EFFORTS

The History of Animal Control

NACA Training Course:
Key Concepts & Resources



NACA Quick Courses

Our self-paced, on-demand learning catalog, built for busy professionals who need practical, flexible training that fits into a demanding schedule. New Quick Courses are being released regularly, giving members quick, accessible knowledge exactly when they need it.

Together, these four colleges reflect what NACA training has always aimed to be: practical, applicable, high-quality, and relevant to the real work happening in the field every day.

A New Toolkit for a New Era

We're also reimagining one of our most-used member resources. What was formerly the Resource Library is being rebuilt as the NACA Toolkit, a refreshed, more useful home for the everyday tools our members rely on.

The new Toolkit will house quick guides, sample SOPs, and practical resources designed to help animal care and control professionals do their jobs more effectively and efficiently. Instead of digging through a library, members will have a toolkit built for exactly what the name promises: real tools, ready to use.



BRINGING OUR TRAINING UNDER ONE UMBRELLA ISN'T JUST AN ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE, IT'S A STATEMENT ABOUT WHERE THIS PROFESSION IS HEADED. ANIMAL CARE AND CONTROL HAS NEVER BEEN MORE COMPLEX, MORE VISIBLE, OR MORE ESSENTIAL TO THE COMMUNITIES WE SERVE, AND THE PROFESSIONALS DOING THIS WORK DESERVE TRAINING THAT REFLECTS THAT REALITY: CONNECTED, COMPREHENSIVE, AND BUILT WITH THE SAME LEVEL OF PROFESSIONALISM THEY BRING TO THE FIELD EVERY SINGLE DAY.

FOR TOO LONG, TRAINING IN THIS INDUSTRY HAS BEEN FRAGMENTED, A CERTIFICATION HERE, A WEBINAR THERE, A WORKSHOP TUCKED AWAY SOMEWHERE ELSE ENTIRELY. THE NACA TRAINING INSTITUTE CHANGES THAT. IT GIVES OUR MEMBERS ONE CLEAR FRONT DOOR TO EVERYTHING THEY NEED TO GROW, WHETHER THAT'S EARNING A CREDENTIAL, DEVELOPING AS A LEADER, STRENGTHENING THEIR ORGANIZATION'S WELLNESS, OR SIMPLY FINDING A QUICK COURSE TO SHARPEN A SPECIFIC SKILL. NO MORE GUESSING WHERE TO LOOK OR PIECING TOGETHER A PATCHWORK OF RESOURCES. JUST ONE PLACE, BUILT WITH INTENTION, DESIGNED AROUND THE FULL ARC OF A CAREER IN THIS FIELD.



“
The strength of this profession has always been rooted in its people.”

THIS IS ABOUT MORE THAN CONVENIENCE. IT'S ABOUT SIGNALING, TO OUR MEMBERS AND TO THE INDUSTRY AT LARGE, THAT THIS PROFESSION IS WORTH INVESTING IN AT EVERY LEVEL. WHEN TRAINING IS SCATTERED, IT'S EASY TO TREAT IT AS AN AFTERTHOUGHT. WHEN IT'S UNIFIED UNDER ONE INSTITUTE, IT BECOMES SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY: A CLEAR, VISIBLE COMMITMENT TO PROFESSIONALIZATION.

THE NACA TRAINING INSTITUTE IS HOW WE'RE MEETING THAT MOMENT, AND IT'S ONLY THE BEGINNING OF WHAT WE BELIEVE THIS PROFESSION CAN BECOME.

Eliminating the “Dog Catcher” Stigma: Modernizing the Solo Unit

By Brandon C. Morgan, Animal Control Officer
Junction City Police Department

For decades, the public—and sometimes our own administrations—have viewed Animal Control as a secondary, reactive force. We were expected to catch strays, write nuisance tickets, and stay out of the way.

But modern animal control is law enforcement. It requires constitutional policing, forensic science, and tactical preparedness. Nowhere is this more critical than in a single-officer unit.

“**The term “dog catcher” is more than an outdated insult; it is an operational liability.**”



I am the sole Animal Control Officer for the Junction City Police Department in Kansas. Junction City sits just outside Fort Riley, encompassing a jurisdiction of nearly 23,000 residents. I do not have a dedicated forensic team, a transport unit, or immediate backup to hand calls off to. Operating at a high volume—averaging nearly 100 calls for service per month—requires a framework built on efficiency and strict procedural discipline.

This is how the Junction City Police Department built a solo-unit framework that leverages objective science, high-liability preparedness, and community-supported field services to operate at a national standard.





As JCPD Assistant Chief of Police Cory Odell notes: "Animal Control Officer Morgan is an essential member of our team striving to enhance public safety, community health, and partnership. His work goes far beyond simply responding to calls and managing animals; he protects our residents, prevents disease, and brings real compassion and dedication to some of our most challenging calls."

When you operate as a single-officer unit, you cannot afford to manage calls on a first-come, first-served basis. On any given shift, my queue is a mix of dead animals on the roadway, at-large strays, wildlife conflicts, aggressive canines, active dog bites, and critical welfare checks. If I do not aggressively triage, the system fails.

Applying military-style workflow management means establishing a strict Continuity of Operations (COOP) protocol. Life-safety threats—such as active bites, aggressive animals at large, or animals in hot vehicles—demand immediate response. Meanwhile, nuisance barking or confined strays are systematically moved to a delayed response queue, allowing me to manage public expectations while maintaining operational control.

While navigating my own queue, I maintain a constant ear on the patrol radio. I listen for fire runs, EMS dispatches, and specific subjects or addresses I recognize from previous animal welfare investigations.

Visibility is a tactical asset. Constant, proactive patrolling does more than deter ordinance violations; it establishes the Animal Control Officer as a highly visible Subject Matter Expert (SME) in the community. By staying proactive and serving as on-hand backup for PD, Fire, and EMS, Animal Control ceases to be a siloed, secondary department and becomes an indispensable force multiplier for public safety.



“Effective public safety response depends on teamwork”

A critical step in modernizing a solo unit is eliminating subjective opinions from your investigations. When a citizen reports a “skinny” dog, they are offering an opinion. When an Animal Control Officer documents a Body Condition Score (BCS), they are presenting scientific evidence.

Consider a recent investigation involving a one-year-old German Shepherd mix named “Dove”. A citizen provided anonymous video evidence showing the owner striking, kicking, and choking the animal for several seconds.

Upon contact at the residence, the suspect admitted to the physical abuse, claiming he was overwhelmed and didn’t know how to control the dog. More importantly, the suspect confirmed the dog was in his care and constantly scavenging for food.

Instead of writing in the report that the dog looked “starved,” I utilized the Purina Body Condition Score (BCS) system. I documented Dove as a BCS 1/9—the lowest possible score, indicating severe emaciation. This objective scoring, combined with the suspect’s confession and the video evidence of the assault, allowed me to immediately seize the animal for protective custody and file state-level felony charges for Cruelty to Animals.

By processing the scene methodically and using established scientific standards like the BCS and the Tufts TACC scale, a solo officer can build a case file that is as robust and prosecutable as any major crimes division.

There is a common misconception that pursuing advanced certifications—such as NACA Level 1 and 2, or DEA-compliant chemical immobilization—creates an officer who is quick to rely on force. In reality, high-liability preparedness does the exact opposite. It provides the foundation for tactical patience.

Before I ever reach for a tool, I am assessing the animal’s “Ladder of Aggression.” Understanding that aggression is usually a fearful, purposeful reaction to a perceived threat allows me to utilize proper distance, non-threatening posture, and verbal defusion to control the scene.

Despite handling hundreds of calls and navigating severe at-large and dangerous dog incidents, I have only deployed my OC spray once, and I have never deployed my Taser. The vast majority of my at-large captures are resolved using nothing more than a soft lead and a deliberate, low-stress approach.

Conclusion: Community-Supported Field Services
The "dog catcher" of the past relied on enforcement through removal—impounding animals, writing tickets, and moving on to the next call. A modern Animal Control Officer understands that we cannot simply arrest or impound our way out of animal welfare issues.



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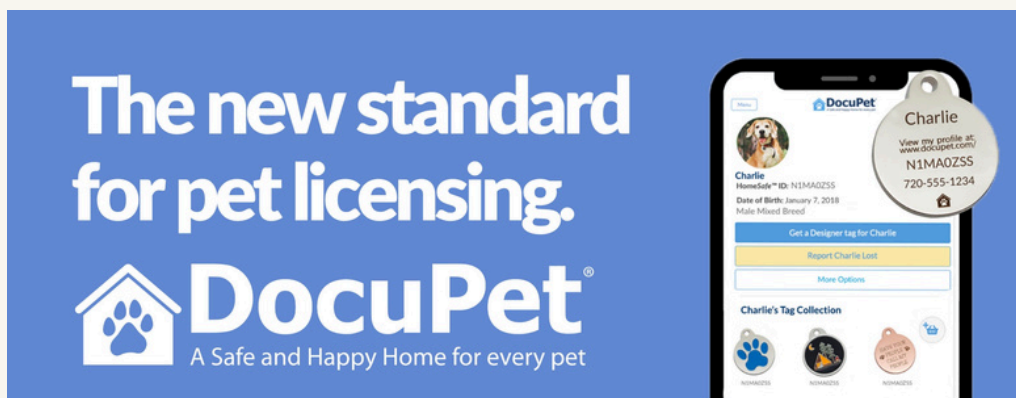
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Celebrating 40 Year Anniversary & Counting

When the community sees that you operate within strict 4th Amendment constraints, utilize scientific data rather than subjective opinions, and approach high-stress situations with de-escalation and tactical patience, their perception shifts. You cease to be a municipal threat and become a respected public safety resource.

Operating as a single-officer unit is undeniably challenging, but a lack of personnel is never an excuse to lower the operational bar. We are not just catching dogs; we are specialized law enforcement professionals. It is time we permanently retire the "dog catcher" myth and operate like it.



What we offer

North America's only complete licensing solution, DocuPet provides services and software to streamline and modernize pet licensing programs. Proudly serving over 200 partners across North America, DocuPet onboards a new partner each week, helping communities across the continent increase their license sales and provide crucial funding for local animal welfare programs and initiatives.



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-Dr. Gary Weitzman, President and CEO, San Diego Humane Society

Learn more at partnerships.docupet.com



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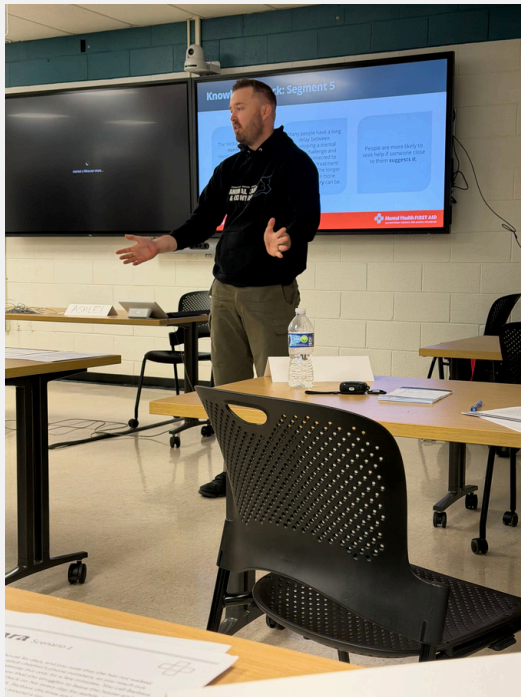
NACA Brings Mental Health First Aid In-Person for the First Time

BY NACA



This year, NACA reached a meaningful milestone: for the first time, Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training was delivered in person to animal control officers and animal welfare professionals in Charlotte, NC.

Mental Health First Aid is a nationally recognized training program designed to teach participants how to recognize the signs of a mental health or substance use challenge, respond with appropriate support, and connect someone to the right resources. For a field that regularly encounters trauma, high-stress calls, and emotionally difficult situations, this training has never felt more relevant.



Bringing MHFA to life in person marked an important shift. While NACA has long recognized the toll this work can take on officers, the in-person format allowed for something virtual training simply can't replicate: real conversation, real practice, and real connection with fellow officers navigating the same challenges.

Participants worked through realistic scenarios, practiced supportive conversation techniques, and left with practical tools they can use both on the job and in their personal lives. For many, it was the first time they had a dedicated space to talk openly about the emotional weight this profession carries.

One student who completed the training shared: *"Clear resources and an instructor-guided learning experience in an open, nonjudgmental environment. It was an amazing, eye-opening course."*

The response to this inaugural session has been overwhelmingly positive, and NACA is already looking ahead. In 2027, we plan to expand Mental Health First Aid training to additional locations, making it more accessible to officers and agencies nationwide. Supporting the well-being of the people who do this work isn't a side initiative for NACA; it's central to building a stronger, more resilient field.

Stay tuned for upcoming 2027 training dates and locations.



Honoring David Marcantel's Legacy



David Marcantel served the NACA Board with dedication and steady leadership from 2005 through 2016. During those years, his commitment helped strengthen our industry, deepen collaboration, and raise the standard for the work we do—work that ultimately serves communities and families across the nation.

David's impact went far beyond board meetings and formal duties. He was known for the kind of character that shows up in how people are treated: with respect, follow-through, and genuine concern for others. Those who knew him remember not only his service, but the way he made time to listen, encourage, and move issues forward with integrity.

As we reflect on his life and contributions, we also celebrate the relationships he built and the lasting influence he left in NACA and the broader industry. David's legacy will be carried forward in the people he inspired and the efforts he helped shape.

Thank you, David Marcantel, for your years of leadership, your heart for the work, and your meaningful impact.

"I had the great pleasure of meeting David a few years back when I helped NACA develop a new strategic plan. I quickly discovered that underneath his dry wit and southern charm David was a strong intellect and critical thinker. He was most certainly an asset to those he served in Louisiana and was a true credit to our profession. The marks he left in Animal Care & Control will be long felt by those who follow."

Jim Tedford

President & CEO

The Association for Animal Welfare Advancement

"It was such a pleasure to serve on the NACA Board with David. His dedication to the animal welfare industry spoke volumes through his service on the board and to his fellow colleagues across the country. He loved to help coach, teach and share his experience with others, which was a tremendous contribution to the industry. He never showed up to a board meeting, without a pot of gumbo or some Cajun specialty that he whipped together. He was a genuinely caring and funny man who will be greatly missed."

Shyanne Schull,
Director, Washoe County
Regional Animal Services

Reflections that I have of David go as far back as circa 1985. We met at Louisiana State University (L.S.U) School of Veterinary Medicine, while attending Louisiana Animal Care and Control Association (L.A.C.C.A.) seminars. He was the field supervisor of Calcasieu Parish Animal Control Center. Ms. Laura Lanza was director of the animal control program there at that time.

"There was no better friend in life to have him as one of yours. He dedicated his life to giving to others."



David and Laura were both P.O.S.T. certified sheriffs' deputies with the Calcasieu Parish Sheriff's Office. They faced unique challenges of South West Louisiana and worked closely with law enforcement. David was Laura's strong "right hand man" and they both brought expertise to the animal control program.

David's experiences included; animal sheltering, animal control, chemical capture, trapping, marine patrol, emergency preparedness, slack water rescue, disaster assistance, livestock patrol, and had an exceptional ability to communicate with citizens and address their animal control concerns.

David and I initiated the Louisiana Animal Care and Control Association (L.C.C.A.) chemical capture program in the state of Louisiana. Together we taught classes on both domestic and livestock tranquilization at the Animal Control Academy of Louisiana.

Continued on next page



David had a blend of American Indian, Cajun and cowboy traditions, which resulted in him being “raconteur par excellence”. A large part of his persona included cooking. Many people enjoyed a variety of the meals he cooked, such as; jambalaya, gumbo, cochon de lait, and fricassee which he prepared at the L.A.C.C.A. seminars. He had a natural ability to bring people together, often sharing stories, relating to fellow comrades through common experiences and knowing what it means to “laissez les bons temps rouler”, (let the good times roll”).

After retirement, David was made an honorary member of the Louisiana Animal Care and Control Association (L.A.C.C.A.) board. His experience having been on the National Animal Care and Control Association (N.A.C.C.A.), board brought a broad national perspective to the L.A.C.C.A. seminars. Our colleague in the animal control and sheltering field has left a legacy for generations to come.

Hilton Cole

Ret.: Director, EBRP An. Cont. & Rescue at City/Parish of Baton Rouge
Louisiana Animal Control Association

How do you begin writing about a man who has impacted thousands of lives in their personal careers?

I was hired by the City of Lake Charles, LA to be Animal Control Director in 1983. David was already in a position of 'dog catcher'. I went directly to him and asked him to give me a chance. I believed together we could change our City/Parish and State. That was the journey to establishing 'professional animal control services'; we started officially in Louisiana. We enforced the laws progressively, humanely, and strategically. We started the Louisiana Animal Control Association with Hilton Cole and Janet Pippins.

When I assumed command of the local animal shelter they were still euthanizing with T-61. David and I met with the Veterinary Committee at LSU School of Veterinary Medicine to begin developing a course for HUMANE EUTHANASIA and taking the steps to become licensed by the State and Federal government agencies.

David was interested in animal cruelty and humane investigations, so I was able to raise funding through my 'humane society' -Animal Concern & Education Corps. David excelled at everything he attempted. He shared his knowledge with those around him.

David drove a rescue rig at every hurricane and emergency the Sheriff's Office needed. He and Diana Morales, Anne Godoux and other staff members evacuated animals when hurricanes looked like they would hit Lake Charles and during Hurricane Laura especially.

I think what I remember the most about David was his giving nature. There was no better friend in life to have him as one of yours. He dedicated his life to giving to others.

I continued talking to David weekly about LACA and the state issues. He continued to lead LACA to make a difference in the training for the young people entering the field of ANIMAL CONTROL/SERVICES to focus on 'professionalism' and community service. David eventually was elected to the National Animal Control, and he continued to lecture at many training conferences.

The individuals David touched with his passion and knowledge over a 35 + year career made the state of Louisiana better for pets and people. His friendship made me a better person throughout 40 + friendship. Everyone he met was impacted by David in some way. I hope the next generation of Animal Services employees coming up in the current generation will remember the journey we took to make their jobs and their communities better.

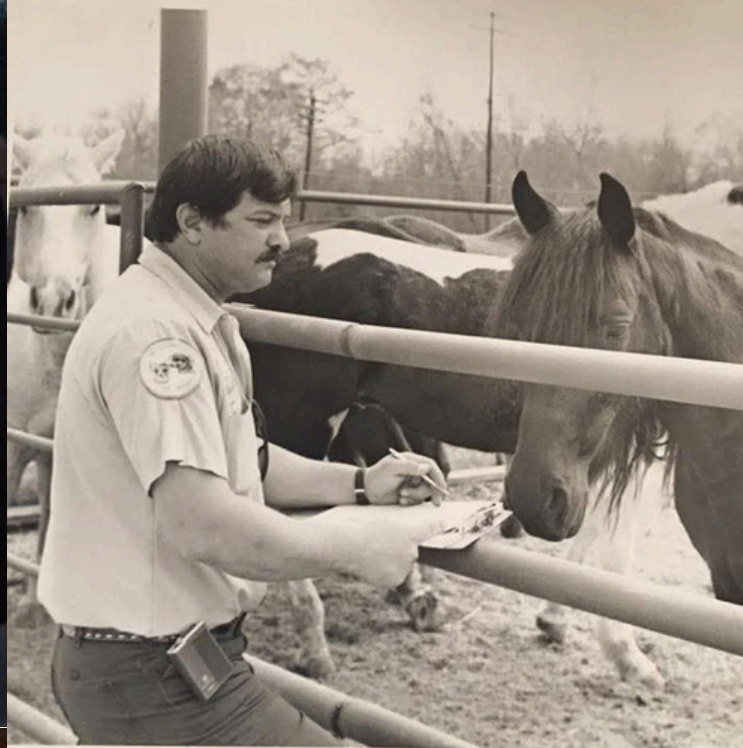
Laura Lanza

Actors and Others for Animals

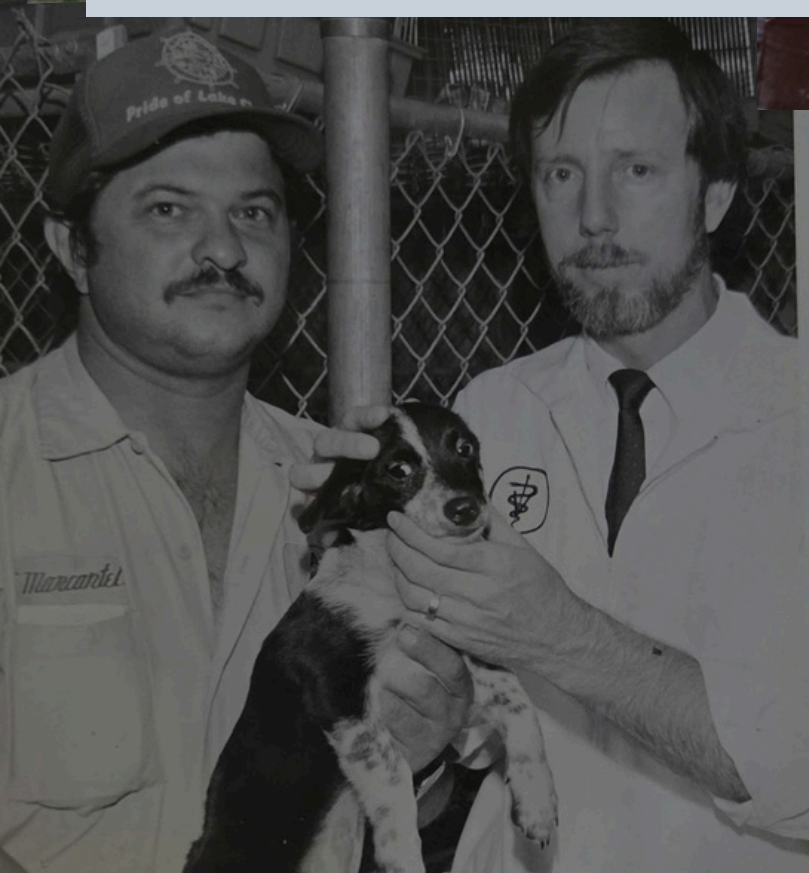
Retired from ASPCA

Former Director- Calcasieu Parish Animal Control and Services Department





Thank you to Laura Lanza, Tina Marcantel (wife), John Marcantel (son), and Christina Marcantel Trahan (daughter), for sharing these wonderful memories and photos with NACA. We are honored.





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we'll reunite.





A Different Kind of Field Work: Lessons from the Wild

Submitted by Michele Eggerman, ACO Laramie Police Department

For two weeks, I stepped into a very different kind of field environment at Na/a'an ku se Wildlife Sanctuary in Namibia, one that ultimately reinforced many of the same principles that guide animal control work here at home in Laramie, Wyoming.

At the sanctuary, I worked alongside a team caring for a wide range of species, including meerkats, baboons, caracals, cheetahs, lions, leopards, hyenas, African wild dogs, genets, horses, and birds of prey. The work was hands-on and constant. Days were spent cleaning enclosures, preparing and distributing food, providing enrichment, assisting with maintenance, and supporting the veterinary team with animals that were sick or injured. While the species were vastly different, the core responsibilities were the same—ensuring safety, meeting basic needs, and responding to animals in a way that supports both their welfare and the surrounding community.

Part of the experience also took place at Zannier Reserve. In this 9,000-hectare conservation area, we assisted with fence checks, wildlife monitoring, and game counts for species such as elephants, rhinos, giraffes, zebras, lions, ostriches, warthogs, jackals, aardwolves, foxes, and antelope. The scale was larger, but the concept was not unfamiliar. Much like patrol and response work in animal control, it required observation, documentation, and an understanding of how animals move within their environment.





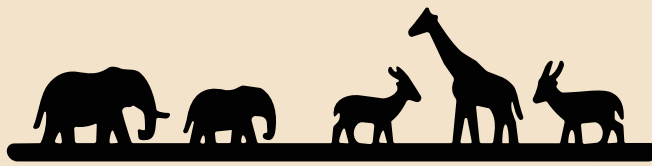
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One of the most impactful aspects of the experience was working alongside anti-poaching rangers and their K9 units. These dogs are trained with precision to detect threats, track movement, and protect their handlers. Watching this work unfold highlighted something ACOs know well, the importance of training, consistency, and the relationship between handler and animal. Whether it is a K9 unit or a field officer, the ability to read behavior and respond appropriately is critical.



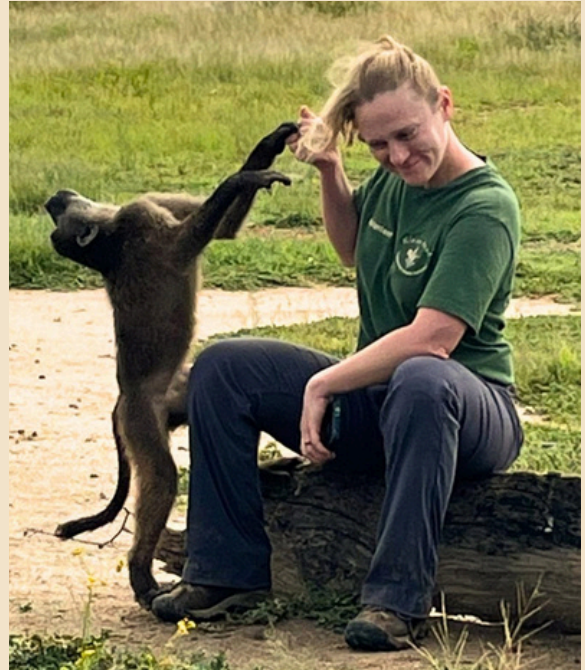
Not all moments were controlled or predictable. While assisting with the horses one afternoon, I encountered a group of adolescent baboons without a coordinator present. Following protocol, I remained still and quiet as they surrounded me. What followed was a brief but intense moment, as many of them gnawed on my legs like corn on the cob before moving on. I was fortunate that the situation did not escalate further. Still, it served as a powerful reminder that sanctuary animals are still wild and of the importance of situational awareness, training, and composure under pressure, skills that are just as essential in animal control work.





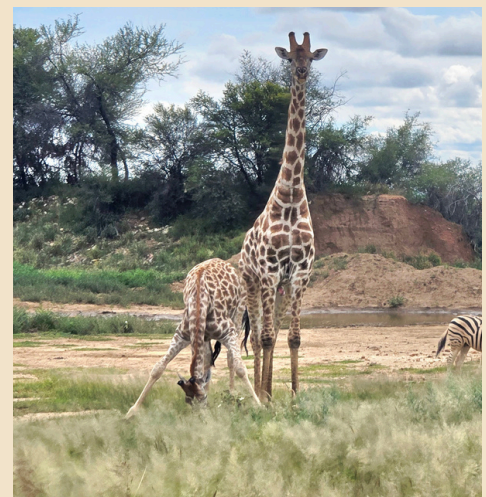
While the setting was thousands of miles away, the lessons were strikingly the same. Animal care and control professionals routinely navigate unpredictable environments, make quick decisions, and balance enforcement with compassion. Whether responding to a loose dog, a wildlife call, a neglect case, or a potentially dangerous situation, the work requires the same foundation: awareness, adaptability, and respect for animal behavior.

This experience reinforced that while the environments may differ, the profession shares a common thread. At its core, this work is about protecting animals, supporting communities, and showing up prepared...no matter what the situation may bring.



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Behind the Badge!

A Conversation with NACA Board President, Mike Wheeler

Meetings, conference calls, votes, and strategy sessions, that's how most of us know our Board President. But behind the title is a career built on hard lessons, hard-earned wisdom, and a genuine love for this profession. In this edition of Behind the Badge, we sat down for a candid conversation to get to know the person behind the role.

If you weren't in animal welfare, what career would you be doing instead?

Probably something in city management or public administration. I genuinely enjoy taking complicated problems, bringing the right people together, and figuring out how to make systems work better. Although I'm pretty sure whatever I did would somehow turn into an animal welfare project eventually.

"I think about the people doing this work every day. If something we change today makes this profession a little better for the next animal services officer, keeps one more family together, or gives someone another tool besides enforcement or impoundment, then the hard days are worth it."





What keeps you motivated on the hard days?

The people, both the people doing this work and the people we're serving. This profession can be incredibly difficult, and it's easy to focus on the problems we haven't solved yet. On those days, I try to remember the families who still have their pets because someone took the time to find a solution instead of simply saying "no." I also think about the people doing this work every day. If something we change today makes this profession a little better for the next animal services officer, keeps one more family together, or gives someone another tool besides enforcement or impoundment, then the hard days are worth it.

What's a hobby or interest of yours that might surprise people?

Home remodeling and construction. I genuinely enjoy tearing things apart and rebuilding them. My wife and I have taken on some pretty significant remodeling projects ourselves, and there's something incredibly satisfying about looking at a problem, figuring out how all the pieces need to come together, and then building it.

Now that I think about it, that may explain quite a bit about my approach to animal services too.



What's a moment in this field that's stuck with you the most?

Ginger. Without question.

About 13 years ago, four years into my career in animal welfare, I encountered Ginger and her 93-year-old owner. I looked at their situation through the eyes of an animal control officer and decided that, by my standards, she could no longer adequately care for Ginger. I made the decision to take Ginger from her.

I truly believed I was doing the right thing. I believed I was protecting Ginger. I believed I was saving her.

Not long afterward, Ginger died. Her owner also passed away soon after. I can't tell you medically what caused either of their deaths, but I have carried the belief that Ginger died of a broken heart missing her person, and that her owner died from the loneliness of losing her companion. I have spent the last 13 years wondering what role my decision to separate them played in both of their final days.

That experience fundamentally changed me and the way I view this profession. At the time, I was focused on Ginger's physical care and whether it met my standards. What I failed to adequately consider was everything they were providing for one another—love, companionship, familiarity, purpose, and a bond that couldn't be measured on an inspection form.

If I could go back to that day, I wouldn't ask, "Should I take this dog?" My first question would be, "What can I do to help this 93-year-old woman keep the dog she loves?" Ginger taught me one of the most important lessons of my career: animal welfare cannot just be about the animal. We have to look at both ends of the leash. Sometimes the best way to help an animal is to help their person overcome whatever barrier is standing in the way of keeping that family together.

I thought I saved Ginger that day. Thirteen years later, I see it very differently.

I can't change the decision I made, and I still carry the weight of it. But I can make sure I never forget what Ginger and her owner taught me. They have influenced nearly everything I've tried to change in animal services since—and they are a large part of why I believe our first question should be how we can help a family stay together, rather than whether separating them is the answer.



What's the most unexpected skill this work has taught you?

How to talk to just about anyone.

Animal services teaches you very quickly that technical knowledge only gets you so far. You have to be able to communicate with people who are angry, scared, grieving, frustrated, embarrassed, or simply having one of the worst days of their lives.

I've learned that listening, finding common ground, and treating people with dignity will solve far more problems than simply telling someone what the rules say. You can know every ordinance, policy, and procedure, but if you can't connect with the person standing in front of you, you're going to have a difficult time creating lasting change.

If your work truck/car had a name, what would it be?

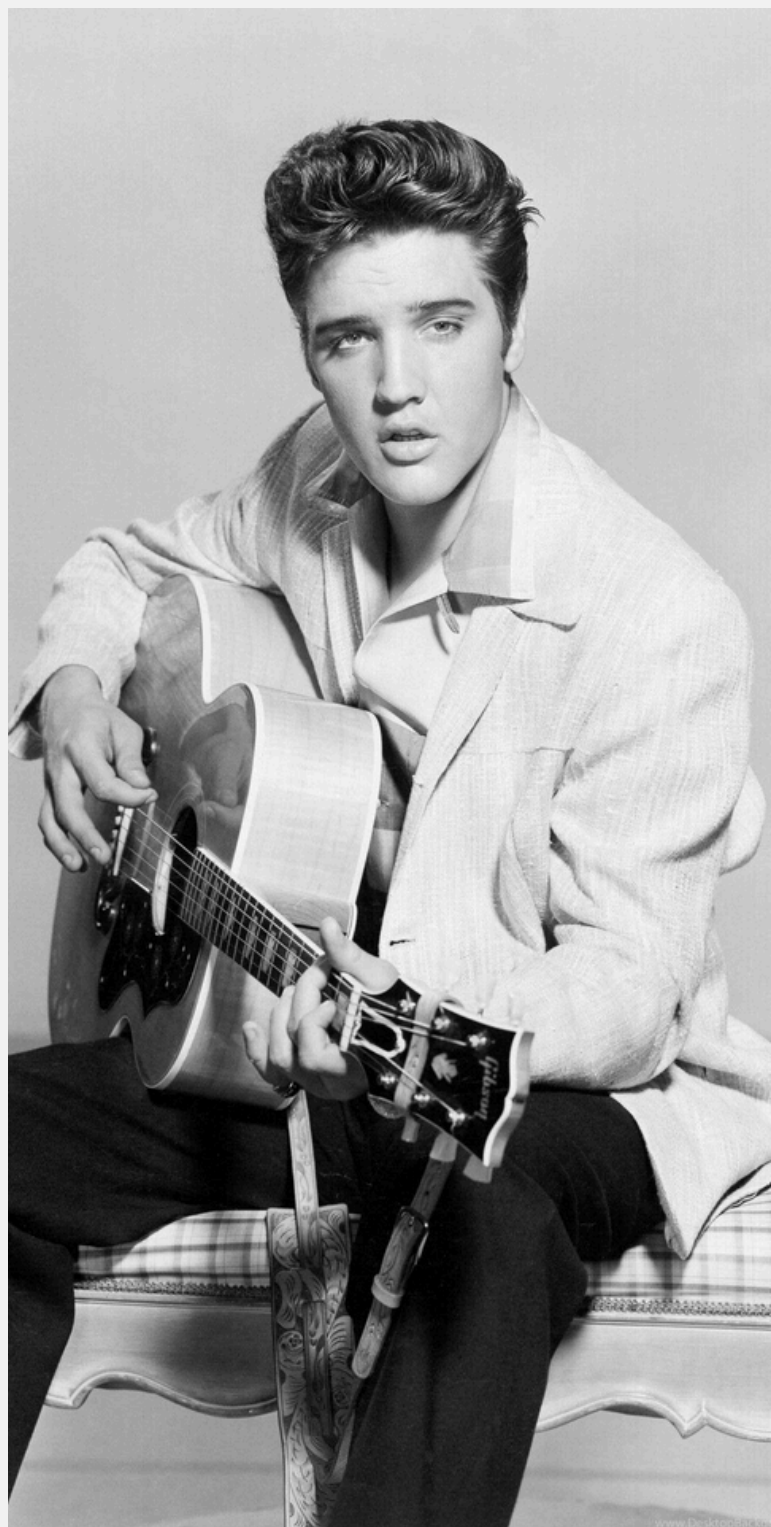
Detour. Because no matter where I think I'm going, something, or someone, usually changes the plan.

What's on your desk right now that shouldn't be?

An Elvis mouse pad someone gave me 17 years ago.

It's worn, faded, and has definitely seen better days, but it's still functional. I've had it my entire career in animal welfare, and at this point I can't imagine my desk without it. After 17 years together, Elvis has earned permanent desk status.

It doesn't ask for much, just "A Little Less Conversation" and a little more mouse action. And as long as it keeps working, Elvis has not left the building.



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