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Special Report: Operation Rescue

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Barbara Woodley hoarded more than 300 dogs, only to keep them in deplorable conditions. It took a three-year legal battle, an army of volunteers, and hundreds of very special new owners to save these broken creatures.

Walter the Boston Terrier pads into Heather Jackson's sunny living room in Sanford, North Carolina. He's a small dog, maybe 9 or 10 years old, with a white wishbone marking on his perfectly square black face. His left eye is cloudy and scarred, and he can't see very well with it. Walter regards me with his good eye. He seems shy at first. But he accepts a chicken strip from my hand, decides I must be okay, and curls up on the love seat where Jackson, a police officer, is sitting. Of her four dogs, she says, "I think he knows that he's my favorite."

Walter was not always so contented. He and Jackson first crossed paths in January 2005, when a dispatcher summoned her to Barbara Key Woodley's property. Woodley, a retired factory worker in her late 60s with a ruddy face and swept-back white hair, was

keeping hundreds of dogs in buildings on her four acres. Many of them were confined in open-top wooden boxes or wire crates with no access to fresh air. A judge had ordered veterinarian Laureen Bartfield onto the land to care for them. But Woodley had threatened to shoot the doctor, according to Bartfield—and from then on, she always visited under police escort. This time Jackson was the officer on call.

Trained to separate her personal feelings from her work as a law enforcement officer, Jackson, 37, had seen her share of animal welfare cases. Still, the conditions on Woodley's land shocked her. "The stench, when you went in there—if you didn't wear a mask, you'd gag the rest of the day," she says. Some of the crates were stacked and had wire bottoms, and the dogs' legs trembled as they tried to maintain their footholds. These animals were not released outside, so those in the top cages were forced to eliminate onto the ones below. Ammonia fumes and residue from their urine burned their skin, eyes, and genitals. "It was just horrid," Jackson says. "They were either petrified of you or aggressive, or they would fight each other just to get some human contact. It was hard to deal with. All I could think was, 'How in the world did this happen?'"

Audio slideshow: Watch Heather and Walter's story

What Jackson didn't know then was that the legal proceedings resulting in the judge's order would unfold into a three-year battle over the fate of Walter and about 300 other dogs—Boston terriers, boxers, miniature pinschers, Pomeranians, Jack Russell terriers, and pugs, among other breeds. A nonprofit California organization called the Animal Legal Defense Fund (ALDF) had recently sued Woodley and her husband, Robert, to rescue the dogs, and its attorneys were plunging into the case with single-minded intensity. They knew they were outsiders in this rural Southern county, that their legal strategy was untested, and that any setback could condemn the animals to

a lifetime of hell. The long odds and high stakes just deepened their commitment.

"Our mantra was 'Failure is not an option,'" says Joyce Tischler (above), a pioneer in the field of animal law who was ALDF's executive director at the time and is now its general counsel. "We were not going to lose this case. We were not going to let the dogs down."

Most of us have heard of people who hoard material objects, piling up so much junk that they can barely navigate their own houses. Less familiar are animal hoarders, who accumulate pets they cannot care for. "We are dealing with something that has generally been perceived as a harmless eccentricity," says Randall Lockwood, PhD, senior vice president for anticruelty field services at the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. "The notion of the crazy cat lady"—unconventional but loving—"is something that you find a lot in popular culture."

The reality is less benign. An estimated 250,000 animals are victims of hoarding in the United States in any given year—making this one of the most far-reaching problems for agencies defending their welfare. Unlike someone who intentionally abuses an individual dog or cat, a hoarder might harm dozens or even hundreds. "In terms of the toll it takes," Lockwood says, "hoarders are a much more serious source of animal suffering."

Recently scientists have begun to investigate the psychology of the phenomenon—you can even find the work of the Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium on the Tufts University Web site. The number of animal hoarding cases, researchers estimate, falls somewhere between 3,000 and 7,000 annually. The perpetrators tend to be older and unmarried, and women outnumber men by about three to one. Often they have elaborate justifications for keeping sick and unkempt animals, emphasizing, for example, that they've rescued them from euthanasia, or denying the poor conditions they're stuck in. Hoarders, it turns out, often live in similar squalor themselves.

In untangling the minds of animal hoarders, experts say it's clear that they're not just latter-day Saint Franceses who've gotten overwhelmed. The behavior has been linked to several mental health conditions, including attachment and personality disorders. "In many of these cases, it goes back to childhood trauma," says one of the field's leading researchers, Gary Patronek, PhD, vice president for animal welfare at the Animal Rescue League of Boston. Frequently, hoarders had a lack of, or inconsistent, parenting, he says, or sometimes suffered emotional or physical abuse. Pets might have provided their only steady companionship. As adults, these people develop a delusional sense that more animals mean greater security. "The animals represent their identity. It's where their sense of self comes from," Patronek says. This helps explain why, without intervention, recidivism approaches 100 percent.

Barbara Woodley—the daughter of sharecroppers, who was a musician in her younger days—adored her pups, according to her family (Woodley died in 2008). "Those dogs were her world," says her son, Ricky Poole, a captain in the local fire department. "She'd see one outside in the cold and she'd pick it up. Her intentions were to breed them and sell them. But the longer she kept them, the more attached she got and couldn't let go." Woodley looked after the animals attentively at first, hand-vaccinating them and sitting with them as they gave birth. She used to tell her older sister, Juanita Hall, that the dogs were her children. "They don't talk back to me," she'd say. "They just love me for what I am." But after a heart attack in the 1990s, Woodley's health declined, and so did her ability to keep her charges in any kind of decent shape. "She just couldn't take care of them like she used to," Poole says.

Whatever the truth, there were masses of dogs in wretched conditions, and no easy fix. In any hoarding situation, beyond the mental health issues involved, law enforcement and animal rescue organizations are faced with a daunting challenge: What to do with the huge number of confiscated animals? Veterinary care alone can cost tens of thousands of taxpayer dollars, and shelters don't have room for the normal stray population, much less wholesale influxes of new animals.

In the Woodley case, ALDF saw a possible solution in a unique North Carolina law that allows third parties to

seek custody of abused animals through a civil trial. But it had rarely been used, and no one knew how it would stand up in court. In 2004 the organization's attorneys decided it was time to find out.

The ALDF has been fighting animal cruelty since 1979. It stopped the killing of wild burros by the U.S. Navy and worked to shut down industrial pig farms that kept animals in deplorable conditions. It has helped draft anticruelty laws in a number of states. And in 2004, when it started receiving reports about the suffering dogs in Sanford, its chief outside litigation counsel, Bruce Wagman, got on the phone and spent three weeks interviewing locals in the small North Carolina town. He learned that Woodley had been accumulating dogs for at least 20 years, breeding and selling some of them. (Though she was married, her husband, Robert, didn't seem to share her predilection.) Many of the animals spent their lives trapped in the "ammonia bomb" of Woodley's closed garage. Later Wagman would discover that Woodley, like many hoarders, led something of a double life. "Out in the streets of Sanford, you would see her driving her white Lincoln, all gussied up," he says. But people who visited her house found a woman covered in dog waste—"in a horrible state."

By December 2004, Woodley had agreed to let a family friend remove 145 of her dogs. But there were still about 300 left. After talks with her lawyers broke down, ALDF sued both Barbara and Robert for animal cruelty and custody of the remaining dogs.

Soon after the lawsuit was filed, Judge Resson Faircloth III visited the Woodley property, saw all the dogs, and later in court declared, "There are too many of them for the small space they're in." That day he handed ALDF its first victory: Laureen Bartfield, the veterinarian, would be allowed on-site for 12 hours a day, six days a week, to treat the dogs. When one of ALDF's North Carolina lawyers asked permission to remove the sickest animals, Faircloth said, "If you've got somewhere to keep them."

Sadly, as it turned out, there were a lot of sick dogs. Dental disease ran so rampant that "their jawbones were actually rotting," Bartfield says. Twenty percent had significant eye problems. Milo, a pug, was permanently blinded by ammonia fumes and had a humped back. Bruce, an emaciated Boston terrier, had cataracts and a scalded underbelly. Over New Year's weekend, Bartfield assembled a team of colleagues who examined the animals and removed 106 of the worst cases.

Woodley's lawyers and a veterinarian she hired insisted that ALDF was exaggerating the problem. "They tried to paint her as some kind of modern-day Cruella de Vil," says attorney George Whitaker. "Mrs. Woodley had as kind a heart as you will ever find." Whitaker concedes that ammonia levels were high in the Woodley house, and that the ailing dogs "may not have been adequately treated." Still, he says, he would have entrusted his own pets to her care. After a few days, the Woodley lawyers convinced Judge Faircloth to stop ALDF from removing any more dogs.

It took another court order before Bartfield could enter the Woodleys' home itself. As she approached the back door, Bartfield says, "the stench was so overwhelming that the police officer said, 'I cannot go in there with you.'" Inside, Barbara Woodley was making lunch and her husband was watching TV, as if nothing were amiss. Bartfield pulled the cover off a shipping crate and found beetles feeding on six Boston terrier puppies. A miniature pinscher had a paralyzing neurological condition; she lay in a filthy wire cage and would later have to be euthanized. Driving home, Bartfield called Wagman, the ALDF attorney. "You cannot ask me to go back there anymore," she said through tears.

But she did, several times a week. Too many dogs needed her attention.

Two trials—one civil, one criminal—began in March 2005. In court, Woodley attorney Norman Post described the lawsuit as a fund-raising stunt by "the California crowd" at ALDF. He and cocounsel Whitaker insisted their clients had not broken the state's cruelty to animals laws: They had never kicked, shot, poisoned, or starved their dogs.

But eight veterinarians disagreed with that interpretation of the law. "Cruelty can be passive," testified Elizabeth Lyerly, a prominent North Carolina vet. "You don't have to put cigarettes out on a dog for it to be cruelty."

Immediately after closing arguments, trial judge Albert Corbett Jr. issued his ruling. He found the Woodleys guilty of the criminal charges and gave each 45 days in jail, but suspended the sentences provided the couple undergo a one-year supervised probation and not take in any more animals for five years. As a result of the civil case, he then released all the dogs to ALDF's custody. The organization would need to house the animals at its own expense and could not spay or neuter them (unless medically necessary) until the appeals process ended. Moreover, if the Woodleys won the final appeal, ALDF would have to return the dogs.

ALDF had never taken custody of animals before. "All of a sudden, we were a bunch of lawyers getting into the shelter business," says general counsel Joyce Tischler. And these weren't just any dogs: They were dogs with just about every type of medical condition, not to mention trauma. Walter the Boston terrier suffered from liver damage and was missing fur on his belly and haunches. "He would sit up on his hind feet, like a gopher, and stare for hours," says Heather Jackson, the police officer, who had started to fall for him. "Everybody thought it was cute, until we realized he was doing it out of distress." Other dogs were aggressive: Stephen Wells, ALDF's current executive director, spent his last five days in Sanford with one hand bandaged from a bite.

As local animal groups spread the news of the case by e-mail, support poured in. A real estate agent named Kelly Wright found an abandoned furniture factory and convinced its owner to offer the building as a temporary shelter dubbed the Halls of Hope. Donors offered pet food, kennels, and vinyl flooring. Hundreds of volunteers, including veterinarians, showed up to care for the animals until homes could be found. "The community basically said, 'Whatever you need, you'll get it,'" says Wells. Jackson visited so often—at least four days a week—that "we had to pry her loose from the doorway most nights," Wells jokes.

An hour away, psychologist Katy McClure was exercising at a YMCA in Chapel Hill when she noticed a sign on the bulletin board requesting supplies for the Woodley dogs. She had just moved to North Carolina and was still unemployed. With time on her hands, she dug up several surplus blankets and headed down to Sanford.

After meeting the dogs, 50-year-old McClure couldn't stay away. "There were so many of them, and they would all look right at you," she says. "I thought, 'I can do something here. This is worthy.'" Three times a week, she'd spend hours cleaning the facility before claiming her reward: the chance to exercise the Jack Russell terriers. "I'd run around like a maniac, and they would chase me in fun, making their little demon noises," she says. Helping out with the Woodley dogs reminded McClure of her own clinical work with traumatized humans. She drove home each night feeling tired and useful.



One of the oldest Jack Russells, an unruly male renamed Steve (after ALDF director Wells), had one eye, bad breath, and a reputation as the shelter's Don Juan. He could scale his chain-link pen, and once found his way into an enclosure full of female Pomeranians. Usually, though, he stuck to himself, rarely barking along with the Jack Russell chorus. McClure often visited him at the end of her shift.

After many of the Woodley rescues had already found foster homes, Steve was chosen for a spot in an obedience class donated by a respected dog trainer. The hope was that he would become more appealing if he was better behaved. Because the sessions were in Chapel Hill, McClure agreed to transport Steve and attend class with him, then keep him overnight before returning him to Sanford.

McClure and her longtime boyfriend, Dana Daum, weren't planning to foster a dog. But what happened next threw them off-guard. When McClure returned Steve to the Halls of Hope, the cocksure terrier grabbed her and looked up as if pleading not to be left behind. "He

hung on to my leg with his little front paws," McClure says. "It was like, 'Get me the hell out of here. I've been in your house.' And it tore me up." After two more home visits, Daum said to McClure, "He was kicked down for the first eight or nine years of his life. Let's make a difference now." She needed no additional convincing.

Audio slideshow: Watch Katy and Steve's story

Steve required time to adjust to his new surroundings. He had to learn to walk on a leash. And to feel safe enough not to bolt when someone tapped a spoon against a cereal bowl. Spoiling has helped: Every Sunday Daum cooks salmon for himself, along with Steve and their cat. They pile onto the sofa, eat dinner together, and watch *All Creatures Great and Small*.

Still, Steve has quirks. He guards McClure fiercely, occasionally growling at Daum. He flees strangers and flash cameras. He can be a scrapper, so the dog park is off-limits. "In his most relaxed moments, he's like a playful pup," McClure says. "But he's also part ex-con. And he can be a real weirdo. That's because of his background. To me, he's far more interesting because he's got these complexities."

Finding foster homes for the Woodley dogs went smoothly at first. "Then all of a sudden we're looking around, and there's about 50 dogs nobody wants," says Wagman. So ALDF began contacting rescue groups around the country. In February 2006 an e-mail message reached the Arizona group MinPinHaven, which promised homes for any of the unclaimed miniature pinschers. Soon Jackson, the cop, was helping load seven of the Woodley min pins—"the ones that were most severely damaged," she says—into a van for an icy midwinter road trip.

Waiting in Phoenix was 32-year-old Alissa Austin, who had picked out a timid black-and-tan dog named Gracie with bald spots on her tail and ears. Austin planned to rehabilitate Gracie, who was about 7, then place her in a permanent home. "This'll be great," she thought. "In a couple of months, she'll absolutely adore us." As the parent of an autistic 12-year-old daughter, she understood patience.

But Gracie was terrified of her new surroundings. After living in a crate all her life, open rooms disoriented her. "Going outside was scary. Grass was scary. Rocks were scary. The sky was scary," Austin says. Worse, Gracie wanted nothing to do with the family. She cowered in a corner, bit Austin's husband, Chris, and urinated on the carpet. Alissa wept in frustration. "I wanted her to love us as much as we loved her," she says.

While rescuers all over the country were trying to coax traumatized dogs into understanding they were finally secure, Austin would lie on her stomach and coo reassuringly. She taught herself dog massage. She bought a plastic kennel with opaque walls, Gracie's "cave" for times she felt vulnerable. Months went by—until out of the

blue one day during the second year, Gracie jumped onto the sofa and settled in next to Austin. "Things were like dominos after that," she says. "Gracie started lowering her defenses—one after another, they would tumble."

The dog still avoided Chris, who worked nights as an engineering technician. He initially blamed himself, believing his schedule somehow prevented Gracie from bonding with him. "You feel like a villain," he says. "To think that a creature so innocent has such a vehemence toward you—it made me feel less of myself." He tried to remain patient. "But there were times I wondered, 'Is this worth it? Will it ever change?'"

A trainer explained that Chris needed to become the bearer of all good things, especially all things edible. When Gracie accepted her first treat from Chris's hand—it took weeks—he shouted to his wife, "She did it! Call your mom!" Now Gracie dances for handouts and sits with Chris when Austin is away. Even her taut muscles have relaxed. With Gracie settled in, the Austins ditched their original plan and decided to permanently adopt her. "We didn't want Gracie to go through this with a whole new group of strangers," Alissa says.

And then a year ago, human and canine switched caretaking roles. Austin was diagnosed with a complex of debilitating conditions—interstitial cystitis, fibromyalgia, and spinal problems—that now prevent her from leaving the house except for brief outings. Sometimes she can do nothing but lie on the sofa. Gracie stays by her side, doling out kisses, returning the attentiveness she once needed herself.

"With an illness that keeps you homebound, you lose sight of goals," Austin says. "She always gives me something to look forward to, so I don't feel like I'm just taking up space and air. I think she knows that we're in it together."

Audio slideshow: Watch Alissa and Gracie's story



The Woodleys exhausted their appeals in October 2007, freeing the foster families to adopt the dogs permanently. Barbara Woodley died four months later—her family believes it was the stress from the lawsuit that killed her. Robert Woodley moved away. Through his attorney, he declined comment.

Lauren Bartfield, the veterinarian, still tears up when she thinks about the outpouring of support for the Woodley dogs. "There were people who stepped forward to adopt the oldest, most arthritic, blind—whatever it was," she says. "It takes someone with patience to go through the heartache of putting them back together, not only physically but emotionally." Those who made the effort are determined to pack a lifetime's worth of good experience into the dogs' remaining years—"to erase what they have gone through and allow them to have a normal life."

Milo, the blind pug, loves fresh air but can't get around outdoors, even on a leash. So Kelly Wright, the real estate agent who ended up adopting him, wheels him through her Sanford neighborhood in a stroller. She and her husband, Brandon, don't mind this unusual arrangement. "It becomes part of you," Brandon says. "You make a commitment, and this is what it requires, and you just do it."

Bruce, the emaciated terrier, wasn't Jill Jaluvka's first blind dog, so the Halls of Hope volunteer already knew what to do. She placed air fresheners with different mild scents throughout her North Carolina home to help Bruce identify where he was. She laid carpet of varied textures, making paths to his bed and food bowl. Finally she contacted a veterinary ophthalmologist, who removed Bruce's cataracts. With his vision restored, the once-timid dog began taking delight in stacking toys and patrolling the perimeter of Jaluvka's yard. Jill found herself blossoming, too. "I'm more nurturing than I used to be," she says. "I like me better with Bruce."

Walter, who stood like a gopher, needed to be house-trained and taught not to nip at visitors or guard his food aggressively. "He was such a challenge to get well," says officer Heather Jackson. "And it's still a work in progress." These days Walter can be found sunbathing with Jackson's other dogs, or walking with her along the pond across the street. "To help him become a normal animal—as much as he can be normal—is profound," she says. "I think about how he had never been in the sun, or even set foot outside before. Simple things like that still get me."

Then there was Edgar, a Boston terrier, one of the oldest Woodley dogs.

Edgar didn't win every heart. At the Halls of Hope, the 10-year-old sat quietly in his cage, seemingly oblivious to the activity around him. "He was just checked out," says ALDF director Wells. "No personality. My impression was, he must be near death because he just doesn't engage."

But Joyce Tischler, ALDF's general counsel, noticed how Edgar followed her with his eyes. "He had this very earnest look," she says. "He didn't bark. He didn't jump. He just sat there calmly like a little gentleman. I realized, 'Oh my gosh, I'm ignoring this dog because he's quiet.'" Inside the kennel, Edgar sat on Tischler's lap and let her scratch him—not something every Woodley dog would do.

Tischler, 56, began visiting Edgar regularly. "I was a little obsessed with him," she says. The day she left for home in California, she kissed him goodbye for what she assumed would be the last time. But whenever she telephoned the shelter, she always got the same report: No one had called dibs on Edgar.

As the Halls of Hope emptied out, attorney Wagman said, half-jokingly, "No one's taking this dog, Joyce. You're going to have to get him."

The last thing Tischler needed was another dog; she had two already, plus a teenage daughter, several cats, and a rigorous travel schedule. And Edgar was a mess—unsocialized, unhousebroken, and in need of polyp surgery, along with extensive dental work.

"Pack his bags," she told Wagman. "He's coming to California."

Tischler flew back east and picked him up. As they drove to the airport, the dog's teeth clattered in fear. But when they boarded the plane—the only first-class trip Tischler has ever taken—she slid Edgar's soft carrier beneath the seat in front of her. He was soon snoring at her feet.

Flying home, Tischler could not imagine what the next three and a half years would hold. She didn't foresee having to get Edgar past a biting phase. She had yet to understand how his racing through the yard, or making slobbering sounds during meals, would teach her to live "fully in the moment—to be a little less human and a little more dog." Nor could she predict whether Edgar would really recover from the Woodley ordeal.

All she could feel, as the plane landed in San Francisco, was pure jubilation. "I have you 3,000 miles away from that woman," she thought as they walked briskly across the terminal. "And you are never going back."

Audio slideshow: Watch Joyce and Edgar's story

Barry Yeoman's work has appeared in OnEarth, Audubon, and AARP The Magazine. His website is barryyeoman.com

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