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Rescue Jackpot in his wheelchair

“IT'S SO VITAL WE KEEP DOING THE WORK BUT I DON'T EVER NOT SEE IT BEING A NIGHTMARE”

Vietnam Animal Aid and Rescue founder on the harsh realities of being the country's only vegan animal rescue

Note: readers may find some rescue stories distressing.

Cat Besch grew up in Virginia, US, in a town known as 'the nation's horse and hunt capital', never dreaming she'd one day operate a vegan animal rescue – a value she refuses to compromise on, for love nor money (quite literally).

Through much of Cat's youth, grooming, riding and fox hunting were a daily norm. That was until she left 'the echo chamber', travelling and living around Europe and Mongolia, where fellow travellers began to change Cat's perception of animals beyond sport or commodities.

She says: "For me, the lightbulb moment was – when you're suddenly in a room and nobody understands why you would do that. I was never in a room where people didn't think that was normal.

"I would not have sat at a table with a vegan 15 years ago, they were a joke to me. Then someone said to me, 'Cat your whole life is about animals, but what is on your plate?' I was a militant anti-vegan, now I'm a militant vegan. To me, my origin story is important; it's given me faith that anyone can change."

Change brews

After a year of enduring Mongolia's cold climate, a six-month, sun-seeking sojourn in Vietnam – where her parents had lived during the war – turned into 13 years and counting after the country's notoriously strong coffee led Cat to a life-changing decision.

She explains: "Lots of people have a similar story, they drink this strong coffee and have dumb ideas. It's like the Wild West – you can start anything. So, I started an animal sanctuary with a friend. I'd worked in rescue and with animals since age 16, so it seemed like it was possible.

"Hoi An's animals really needed help and when everyone got to know who I was they started coming to me. I don't have formal training but I grew up managing barns and I had access to people I knew I could ask questions to."

Cat was unable to sustain the vet practice, which had originally been part of the sanctuary, due to poor funding opportunities and a skills shortage. Though she'd love to save

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more farmed animals, she says there is a country-wide lack of veterinary knowledge in a country where most animals are considered 'lunch'.

Among the few farmed animals the team has cared for were two pigs unwanted by a neighbour. They lived comfortably until around age nine, when Cat says their decline was difficult to experience, with little effective treatment to hand.

"A pig is not a patient; they're never going to be treated the same. There's no information if you want to save the life of a pig."

At the time of writing, Cat was caring for around 50 animals, between a shelter and her home, doubling as a 'quarantine house', with around 15 furry and feathered housemates. "Sometimes I have chickens, ducks, puppies and kittens just climbing my curtains. My daily world changes so much, sometimes there'll be a chicken on my couch watching a movie with me."

The difficulty of rescue

Animal rescue in Vietnam is "a million times more complicated compared to Western countries", says Cat. This is due to factors including landscape, laws, lack of veterinary skills, attitudes to animals and the weather. She adds: "It's so different but so vital we keep doing the work, but I don't ever not see it being a nightmare. The things we have to see and the total absence of societal support for what we do is disheartening – that's a nice way to put it. It makes the work particularly hard. If I were to have a rescue at home, resources and donors would be there and people would be excited to come to a fundraiser, a trivia night at a local bar or something. But the Vietnamese would be like 'why would I donate to an animal rescue?' A lot of people care about animals in Vietnam but they're a silent minority and that's why it doesn't count."

She explains cases where confiscation is necessary are difficult due to a lack of law and enforcement.

"The hardest thing is there's no legal recourse for anything that happens. No matter what abuse we see, we don't have police back up. So, in major abuse cases where people won't give up an animal, we often have to give up. There's never been a prosecution for animal cruelty in the history of Vietnam."

Exotic wildlife kept for entertainment or status is a common problem.

"We're currently working on a bald eagle found in Saigon, after some backpacker posted a Tik Tok video of it sitting on a pole on a sidewalk. He was all like 'Vietnam's crazy, check out this bald eagle,' and then others were like, 'that's not supposed to be there.' We think whoever bought it is a wealthy, powerful person in Hanoi who has it for status. But it's a heavily protected bird and we've got seven organisations working on its confiscation."

Occasionally, there are some success stories. Cat talks about a case where she was able to rescue a one-handed 'pet' monkey, kept on a chain on someone's property. However, confiscation proved difficult and was only achieved after she was forced to pay the wildlife authorities to allow her to transfer the monkey to safety.

When dogs have their day

At the centre of Cat's universe is a disabled dog named Jackpot, who's paralysed from the waist down, after he was likely hit by a vehicle.

"I was in a coffee shop and he was all bloodied up and he just dragged himself up to me and gave me this look I've now known for seven years of 'hi, I need something, can you do something for me?' I saw how pitiful he looked. We couldn't take any more animals but I knew I couldn't leave him there. I went to the bathroom and he came and sat behind the toilet. It was unnerving but I thought 'he has to come with me now, we've peed together'."

"We've tried him in a wheelchair but he hates it. He doesn't acknowledge that he's disabled. He gets around great and we pick up after him and that's his life. It's just the best job being the centre of his world."

A twist in the tail

The daily abuse of animals, when you're powerless to stop it, is mentally draining to say the least. But occasionally, the emotional labour involved in her work can have its advantages for a confrontational vegan like Cat.

The rescuer recalls an encounter with a cat catcher who had captured three cats trying to wriggle free from metal baskets attached to his motorbike. The rescuer describes how she'd "had it" and how the emotional toll of a morning when she'd put an injured cat to sleep drove her to risk her life for the would-be meat-trade victims. She stole the keys from the bike, which was parked up in a driveway, stuffing them in her bra for safe-keeping, leaving the catcher baffled and uncertain how to react. She said the neighbours came out to watch the spectacle "like it was a football game". A man who, presumably planned to sell a cat to the catcher, emerged from his home with a machete.

Cat explains, "I'm not usually a badass. I'm such a big baby most of the time but I was so full of adrenaline. I was just so burnt out; I hate my job more than anything in the world and I cannot stand any part of my day. So, I just called his bluff and put my hand up like 'come on let's go'."

The move worked and, with the support of a translator, and the villagers warning off the householder, Cat was able to safely secure the cats in a taxi to the rescue centre where she reveals, "once we were back, I fell to my knees and just started sobbing."

On fundraising

"A lot of people have told me over the years if you stop talking about veganism you'll get more money. My son is a pig, my best friend is a chicken, my baby is a duck; I'm not selling them out because of cash."

"Fundraising is very difficult for many reasons; it's not only because we're an outspoken vegan organisation – but that will be the case until the day I die."

To find out more or donate to Vietnam Animal Aid and Rescue-US, visit vnanimalaid.org/donate.

By Cat Thompson

