



Daryn Kagan relaxes with her dog Darla.

The Pets Beat

By Carla Davis

You've seen their bylines, read their articles and know their faces from the evening news. We've interviewed five print and broadcast journalists who are inspiring and entertaining us every day with their poignant, funny and timely stories about animals and the people who love them.

They're advocates, too, making sure the big issues get covered, the underdogs get noticed and the regular folks — saving lives, one pet at a time — get the 15 minutes of fame they deserve. Hats off to these reporters. We're smarter and happier because of them.

When Daryn Kagan learned that her contract at CNN wasn't going to be renewed, the intrepid anchor asked herself: If I could do anything in the world, what would I do?

She answered emphatically in November 2006 with the launch of DarynKagan.com, a website based on inspirational news.

With its tagline of "Show the World What's Possible," the site is Kagan's vision of a better world through "hopeful news." By posting videos she has created herself and links to stories and videos published elsewhere in 13 topic areas, Kagan is building a community of people interested in everything from sports and celebrities to heroism and animals. The animal stories, she says, are the most popular.

Take "Last Chance Corral," for instance, Kagan's original piece about an organization in Athens, Ohio, that rescues abused and neglected horses. Kagan liked the message of "one person's trash is another's treasure." "[The story] shows that it's possible to save a horse, see it thrive and see it bring great joy," she says.

Sometimes the videos Kagan posts are just fun, like "Bird Dances to Arabic Music," from October 2009. "When I heard myself laughing aloud, I knew I had to share it with you," she wrote in the story's description.

Kagan counts on fans to suggest stories, and she has made it easy for them to share. "Tell Me a Story" generates 50 to 60 percent of her content. "It gives people a voice," Kagan says.

And those voices are coming from everywhere. "I hear from just as many men as women," Kagan says, and "far-left tree-huggers and far-right evangelicals." They find her, too, on Facebook and Twitter. Kagan "tweets" five to eight times a day, she says, and has around 3,200 followers.

When she's not maintaining her website, Kagan is looking toward the future: Syndication, Internet and book deals are all in the works. It's a pace she clearly loves. "I don't feel like I'm working," she says.

Daryn Kagan

Owner/host, www.darynkagan.com

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"Our objective was to get animals adopted."

William Hageman became "the dog guy" quite by accident, but he's not complaining. After a 40-year newspaper career, much of it spent on the sports desk, Hageman is embracing his role as a *Chicago Tribune* feature writer with a nose for all things animal.

He has Kinky Friedman to thank. Hageman's pair of stories about the singer-turned-writer, who founded Utopia Animal Rescue Ranch, struck a chord with readers in early 2000. The *Tribune* gradually started covering "animal issues": dogfighting, abuse cases and euthanasia.

A colleague suggested a semi-regular column called "Unleashed" that would include police calls about animals; it would be quirky and fun, Hageman says, with just enough "inserted outrage." When Hageman took over the column, he changed the format to favor shelters and rescue groups, promoting their events and their hard-luck cases. "Our objective was to get animals adopted," he says, "to keep nudging people. And to maybe do some good. I think we did." The column became a blog that ran every Friday.

When "Unleashed" was dropped because of budget cuts, the *Tribune* went from daily pet coverage to basically none, Hageman says. But "the door has reopened a little bit," and Hageman sounds hopeful. "In the last two to three months, a couple of pet-related stories have been pitched to me from editors," he says. One, about Safe Humane Chicago's Cynthia Bathurst, ran in October 2009. On its heels: a story about how to adopt a pet, complete with head shots — all of older animals needing homes.

Hageman trusts that readers will respond to this story as they've done in the past. Sparked by an animal's photo, they will visit the shelters with open minds — and hearts — and adopt. In fact, Hageman trusted readers to pick his own shelter dog six years ago when he was ready to add to his family. The *Tribune* ran head shots and profiles of several dogs, and more than 1,300 votes later, Queen ("sweet, needy, pathetic looking") went home with Hageman and has been "the perfect dog" since.

Read William Hageman's stories at archives.chicagotribune.com/writers/william-hageman.



William Hageman

Staff writer, *Chicago Tribune*



The volunteer work "transformed the way I wanted to live my life."

Two days after Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, Sharon L. Peters made a decision that would change her life: She would take leave from her job as editor of a Colorado newspaper and go volunteer in the Gulf region. Seven weeks later, she called the Humane Society of South Mississippi and asked what she could do to help.

For four weeks, she and some friends showed up at the shelter at 7:30 every morning to walk dogs and provide much-needed human contact for the animals. It was emotionally tough work, especially for someone who had always been uncomfortable in shelters. "I girded myself," Peters says, "but there were nights and days that I wept."

For the next few months, Peters kept in touch with the shelter director and continued to volunteer. There was no great epiphany, she says, but "one day I left my job." The volunteer work "transformed the way I wanted to live my life."

Now she writes about animals for *USA Today*, where she had spent two stints as an editor. Topics include shelters and adoptions, advances in medical care and trends, "anything related to how pets are fitting into our lives and how we're improving their lot," Peters says. For instance, her story about pet prosthetics ran in October 2009. Medical stories in general tend to resonate with readers.

Her column is called "Pet Talk." When Peters wrote about her dog Rufus' brain tumor, she was stunned by the hundreds of reader responses — the largest number yet. "They commiserated with me," she says. "Others felt it was their opportunity to comment on a beloved animal, because they knew I was a good audience. People finally feel like they don't have to be apologetic about the depth of emotion they share with their animals."

Read Sharon L. Peters' stories at www.usatoday.com (search for Sharon L. Peters).

Sharon L. Peters

Freelance writer; columnist, USA Today

"I've grown to know that people respond to animal stories."

Steve Hartman wasn't surprised in the least when viewers of his *CBS News* feature segment, "Assignment America," sent him to Best Friends Animal Sanctuary for a story. The premise was this: Every week, Hartman revealed three story pitches. Viewers went to CBSNews.com to vote for their favorite. Hartman took the winning pitch and turned it into a segment for the following Friday's show.

Back in September 2006, Hartman had heard about Best Friends' airlift of 295 cats and dogs from war-torn Lebanon and thought viewers would love to know more. They did. The segment he eventually filmed, called "Refugee Pets Rescued," ran the next month.

Those end-of-the-broadcast stories — the ones that make you feel good after the 30 minutes of serious stuff that comes before — are Hartman's forté. And though animal stories make up only

about one out of every month's broadcasts, they're his favorite. "If I could pick one genre to do day in and day out, it would be animal stories," he says. "I want people to smile, to feel good ... and to feel good about the planet we live on. No person is as pure and as good as an animal."

Hartman's passion is intelligent animals: elephants, dolphins, dogs and the like. So no story has moved him more than the remarkable bond between an elephant named Tarra and a dog named Bella. "It was a magical thing to see," says Hartman, who gained exclusive access to the pair at The Elephant Sanctuary in Howenwadd, Tennessee.

The animals' friendship defies explanation. "It's an incredible little love story that can't be denied," Hartman says. His video

Maryann Mott found her calling more than 15 years ago when she rescued “two dogs, a bunch of cats and some rabbits” from a neighbor’s abandoned home and tracked down a no-kill shelter to take them. Mott, a public relations pro at the time, started volunteering at the shelter, and for about a year published a free paper called the *Desert Pet News*, promoting local rescue groups. She became hooked on writing about animals.

Mott found a larger platform at the *Desert Sun* in Palm Springs and, as a freelancer, made her mark with a gutsy front-page article about a hoarder. A man claiming to be an animal rescuer but who was “very secretive” had raised suspicions. “A guy followed him home and peeked over his fence,” Mott says. In the yard were 60 dogs, some chained, some dead. An investigation into another of the man’s properties — this time, a trailer — yielded “tons and tons of cats.”

The topic riveted readers. “A couple of days later, I met a woman who said, ‘Did you read the story about the hoarding?’ I think people were outraged,” Mott says.

Still, articles about animals were a hard sell. When Mott pitched a pet column to the *Desert Sun*, the editor laughed and said, “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard. No one’s going to read that.”

Mott says, “Sometimes you hit editors who just don’t get it.” But she knew there were plenty of editors out there who did “get it” — and they were working for pet-related media. So she zeroed in on niche publications and earned steady pay from *Dog Fancy*, *I Love Cats*, *Pets: Part of the Family* and *Pets.com*. And now, because attitudes about pets have changed over the years, you can find Mott’s byline in mainstream media, too, including *Family Circle*, *National Geographic News* and *Christian Science Monitor*. She gets her ideas for story topics from everywhere: blogs, chat boards, Twitter, the Internet.

Next up for Mott is a news-related pet show. She has just shot the pilot. “I’ll be doing exactly what I’m doing now,” she says, “except on TV.”

segment went viral on YouTube, with more than three million hits to date. Again, Hartman wasn’t surprised.

“I’ve grown to know that people respond to animal stories,” says Hartman, who has covered everything from whales to four-legged chickens. “Animal lovers are very passionate. They feel like there are not enough animal stories on TV.” And he agrees. “I’m not talking about dog food scares, but animal stories that show the value that animals have.”

Hartman is happy to do his part to see that stories like that get told. “This would be a great thing to do for the rest of my life,” he says. 🐾

Find Hartman’s stories at www.cbsnews.com (search for Steve Hartman). To suggest stories for “Assignment America,” call CBS at (212) 975-4321 and ask for Steve Hartman.

Steve Hartman

Correspondent, CBS News



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Maryann Mott

Freelance writer and author,
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Screenshot, CBS News