

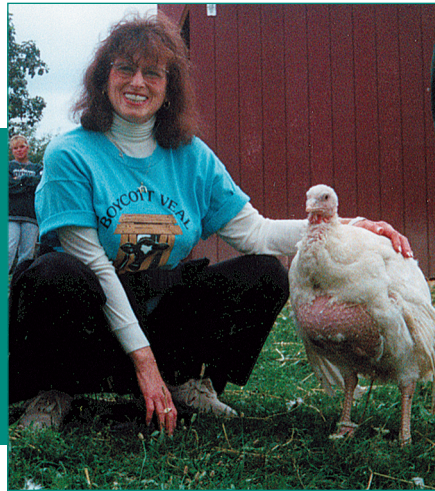


# ACTIVIST'S DIARY TALES FROM THE TRENCHES

## KINSHIP CIRCLE

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By Brenda Shoss



Ebony strands of sky coiled through downtown St. Louis as Colleen Tilford videotaped a macabre parade. The 28-year-old mom had secured a babysitter so she could accompany Ringling Bros. Circus handlers on their post-performance walk with the elephants. Crouched in the dark, she recorded the ritual march of shackled elephants from the Savvis Center to the loading docks.

Entwined from tail to trunk, the elephants jogged single-file toward the railroad tracks. When one arthritic female stumbled, irate trainers bullied her with formidable voices. "She was physically spent," Tilford recalls. "One trainer drove the sharp edge of his bullhook into the tender flesh behind her leg. Others beat her until she finally heaved her body into the box car."

Why would a housewife and office manager for a health facility risk arrest and jail time to expose animal abuse in circuses? While most people chart a calculable course between errands, work, family and recreation, an activist transcends everyday life to inhabit the unpredictable. Animal rights activists cut across all demographics. They are grandparents, students, and spouses. Chances are, you work, carpool or exercise with someone who dons a cow suit, sits in a cage, writes letters, or even goes to jail-to speak out for animals.

At age 10, Paul Watson released animals caught in the jaws of leghold traps in the woods around his home. Time magazine recently dubbed the Greenpeace co-founder and current president of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society a member of "A Century of Heroes" for the planet. The 50-year-old's resume is extraordinary. To unveil covert atrocities inflicted upon ocean wildlife, he has smashed fishing trawlers, rammed whaling ships, and navigated the icy labyrinths where harp seals are clubbed and shot. In 1979 Capt. Watson attacked the Sierra, a pirate vessel notorious for the slaughter of an estimated 25,000 whales. But his defining moment occurred in an inflatable boat off the California coast, where he drifted between a Soviet ship and a pod of whales, hoping to deter the illicit whalers.

"We found out quickly that our idea wouldn't work," Watson recounts. "The harpooner fired over our heads, striking a female whale." Another whale then charged toward the killers' harpoon

canon. A single shot sent him reeling directly toward Watson's flimsy craft.

"I caught this whale's eye and I knew he understood what we had tried to do for him" Watson remembers. "He could have easily crushed our boat or seized us in his jaws. He did neither. Instead, with great effort he slid back beneath the waves and died."

Watson later learned the whales were butchered to supply high-heat resistant oil for ballistic missiles. "They destroyed an intelligent and beautiful creature to manufacture a weapon meant for mass extermination. That is when it occurred to me that human beings were insane."

Activists such as Watson possess a basic intolerance for abuse of the innocent. Most claim that a life-altering event led to their iron-clad resolve. Death was the catalyst for my mother, Sammy Shoss. Diagnosed with scleroderma and hospitalized in 1989, she experienced simultaneous pulmonary edema and heart failure. During her week on life-support, she prayed to live. "Money, education or travel no longer mattered," she says. "I realized that if all I wanted was my life, perhaps other creatures did too."

Shoss pledged to never again be responsible for the death of another living being. She began to purchase cruelty-free cosmetics and household goods. She replaced jewels, furs and leather with animal-free togs and volunteered as a humane educator at area shelters. Today the 65-year-old grandmother is a hit-and-run literature artist who deposits animal rights pamphlets in small-town gas stations, hotels and restaurants across the nation.

In 1996 my mother and father proudly carried the Missouri state banner in a national animal rights march to the U.S. Capitol. "Everyone has a purpose. Animal rights is my heart. Now I know why I am here," Shoss says. Sean Diener, executive director of the Utah

Animal Rights Coalition (UARC), shares her unyielding sense of purpose. At first glance, the fresh faced 21-year-old exudes Beaver-Cleaver charm. But in 1999, costumed as a pig at the wheel of a dump truck, he unloaded poop at the feet of President George W. Bush and entourage outside a Ham House Restaurant. Before puzzled police officers could arrest him, Diener spilled the smelly load in a dramatic play for CNN, BBC and over 25 other network cameras.

He participated in two other finely tuned “manure drops” outside the Democratic and Republican National Conventions. Among the protesters present to defend labor rights, anti-globalization and other causes, Diener was first to go to jail. “For that reason alone, I received the most media coverage. Millions got the message: Meat stinks for the environment, for our bodies, and especially for the animals.” Diener believes passion stirs people. “If I get arrested for my convictions, people know this is a worthy cause.”

Fellow vegans Cayce Mell and Jason Tracy launched their kindred passion when they married and established Oohmahnee Farm, a 100-acre sanctuary in Pennsylvania dedicated to the rehabilitative care of over 1500 abused, abandoned or displaced farmed animals.

***Despite a crash course in veterinary care, nothing prepared the two twentysomethings for the largest farm animal rescue in history. Last September a tornado ripped through Buckeye Egg Farm in Croton, Ohio, leaving 1.5 million hens imprisoned without food or water. When Tracy called, Buckeye directors told him they had already initiated a “clean-up.” Tens of thousands of live birds had been stuffed into dumpsters and gassed. Without invitation, Tracy, Mell, and their then 3-month-old son Aedan headed straight for Buckeye Farm.***

Once there, Tracy hurriedly snapped photos of dehydrated and starving birds crushed between rows of dilapidated wire mesh. Buckeye authorities soon ordered him off the property. “Jason told them: ‘We will ensure that every media outlet knows you have refused to let us save lives,’” Mell says. The threat of negative publicity worked. That night, rescuers loaded the first 85 hens on trucks bound for a better life. Ultimately, they saved 6,000 birds.

Heidi Prescott, national director of the Fund For Animals, lobbies to instigate legislative reform for animals. The former wildlife rehabilitator says that “what most people never see is the struggle these individuals go through to keep their lives.” For 10 years Prescott witnessed that struggle when she fought to shut down Pennsylvania’s Hegin’s Pigeon Shoot, a 62-year-old Labor Day bloodbath in which 5,000 pigeons were annually shot at a 30-yard range.

“It was as if I’d stared into the face of evil,” Prescott says. “More birds were wounded than killed. ‘Trapper boys’ collected the ones who fell inside the shooting circle. These children ripped the heads off living birds in a carnival-like atmosphere with cheering from the stands.”

In the free-for-all to retrieve fallen birds, activists and inebriated participants scrambled over one another. Fortunate pigeons were treated or humanely euthanized in on-site veterinary vans. The Fund For Animals eventually garnered a Supreme Court Opinion in favor of banishing the event. Last year organizers signed a legal

agreement to terminate the shoot. Prescott, who endured two jail sentences, has no regrets. “I loved freeing the pigeons. In all my work for animals, the motivation to reduce suffering is so strong it surpasses fear.”

Lisa Lange, PETA’s 34-year-old director of policy and communication, wages her battles on the public relations front. To provoke media coverage, PETA has pedaled unclad models to protest fur and employed a giant bunny to trail former vice president Al Gore in a stand against government-funded animal tests.

In a recent crusade to upgrade conditions for McDonald’s and Burger King’s factory farmed animals, PETA supplied a rare glimpse inside America’s slaughterhouses. Affidavits and videos revealed how the futile blast of a stun gun leaves animals alert and trembling as they are dismembered. PETA’s cruelty investigations exposed battery hens incarcerated in puny, lightless cages and 600 pound pigs crammed in narrow crates, unable to move.

Both fast food giants eventually agreed to meet requirements for more humane standards. PETA’s controversial campaigns spark dialogue among average people and frequently generate positive results. In 1993 Lange and nine other activists staged an anti-fur sit-in in designer Calvin Klein’s office. One week later, Klein joined the growing ranks of fur-free designers.

“Extreme actions are a matter of perspective,” Lange says. “It’s extreme that we still slice the beaks off baby chicks and slit the throats of fully conscious animals. Non-violent acts of civil disobedience bring attention to these issues.” As individuals, Lange concludes, activists find themselves in some precarious positions. “But for all of us, it’s worth it.”

Another lifelong activist might agree. “Be sure you put your feet in the right place,” Abraham Lincoln once said. “Then stand firm.”

