

KPC Sangha Rescue Animals after Hurricane Katrina

FOR A GROUP OF BUDDHIST practitioners it was a way to live the path—on their feet—while trying to relieve the suffering of others.

"I just had to go. There wasn't any choice. I was compelled. I had been feeling so impotent watching all the disasters in the world...this was finally something I could do," recounted Dr. Pema Mallu, Buddhist nun from the Kunzang Palyul Chöling (KPC) sangha in Sedona, Arizona.

When asked why she decided to go, her response was typical of those in the sangha who headed to the Gulf Coast to rescue animals after hurricane Katrina hit. And to the person they have been changed forever.

"You can blame this all on CNN," said Jetsunma Ahkön Lhamo, spiritual director of Kunzang Palyul Chöling. "I was seeing these animals suffer and it was making me crazy. KPC has a ranch; we can get food. We have to get these animals."

Immediately a team was assembled. The first to go was Dr. Pema Mallu, a nun and holistic veterinarian with 28 years experience. Accompanying her was Nydia Alexandra, a seasoned nurse practitioner and an excellent dog handler, nun and a long-time student of Jetsunma's.

Driving through the night they arrived in Tylertown, Mississippi, just north of New Orleans. The triage center, set up by the Utah-based, national animal rescue group Best Friends, looked like a M.A.S.H. unit. Dozens of volunteers had shown up from every part of the country on a few days' notice.

Ani Nydia recalls her experience: "We'd start at 5:00 am and work right through to 1:00 or 2:00 am the next morning. Best Friends rescue teams went into New Orleans several times a day and scooped up animals wherever and however they could. These traumatized and muck-caked dogs and cats would be brought out and processed at the center. The condition of the dogs was almost unbearable. Most had chemical burns from standing or swimming in the toxic sludge. The pads of their feet looked like raw hamburger and many of their bellies were burned from being in the infested water. They were dehydrated, emaciated, hungry and in shock. So we loved them up and patched them up. With just the slightest kindness shown to



found the stupa retreat land. When contacted, the owner, who's first name was Katrina, enthusiastically offered her place to the teams. "This was a good sign that we were on track. Guru Rinpoche had answered our prayers!" recounted Norbu.

Immediately the first team went in. They rescued five dogs that day, pulling the dogs from the toxic filth, breaking down doors in some cases and enticing the dogs with hot dogs. The smell and conditions were beyond description, recalled Chris Hodgson who, since Katrina, has devoted full time to caring for the dogs. Team two arrived a week later and rescued more dogs. By mid-September twenty dogs had been rescued and driven back to KPC retreat land near Payson, AZ, 1300 miles away.

In Arizona, Ani Megan Gilana dropped everything and headed up the running and logistical side of

the rescue operation. Ani Alexandra Palmo did the same and began madly calling for in-kind donations. The 150-acre retreat land designated by Jetsunma to be the rescue center is off the grid in a beautiful valley surrounded by the six-million acre Tonto National Forest. Shelters and secured pens had to be built, food and medical supplies purchased and stored, vet visits lined up, volunteer teams recruited and managed—all had to be created from scratch—and fast.

Under Jetsunma's constant vigilance and guidance ever-expanding events began to unfold. "Through lots of phone calling and networking we connected early on with a group called Operation Orphans of the Storm. They were associated with the Marin Humane Society in San Francisco and were arranging charter flights on 737's to evacuate the dogs. Philanthropists and celebrities were making this happen and ultimately some 1500 dogs were flown out of the Gulf region to shelters all over the country," recalls Ani Megan. "We were able to get on the list and in late September 110 dogs and 10 cats, caged and strapped into seats and in the cargo hold below, landed at midnight in Phoenix." By mid-morning all the dogs and cats had been ferried to the KPC retreat land called Dakini Valley, first by cattle hauler, then pickups and SUV's. Nearby ranchers and local families

responded with overwhelming support and help, as would be the case in the weeks and months to come.

If small acts of intentional compassion can ripple into waves of kindness and caring this truly was one of those times. As the word got out help poured in from everywhere: blankets, food, dog houses, medical supplies, offers to help financially and volunteer time at Dakini Valley. Ani Palmo contacted PetSmart Charities and they responded with in-kind igloo shelters and a \$12,500 fund to handle much-needed medical expenses. Hills Science Dog Food promised unlimited food supplies for the animals as long as they were in KPC care. Best Friends gave \$20,000 and their staff and volunteers provided tremendous experience, advice and hands-on help. Local grocery stores and the Super Walmart made offerings of food. Funds from Sedona residents and people from all over, moved by the mission and wanting to help, were spontaneously donated.

Ani Alyce Louise took a leave of absence as did Ani Miranda Coates to help full time with round-the-clock feeding, dog walking and cleaning out pens. As was always intended, the KPC rescue center was set up as a temporary home to reunite the animals with their owners, for fostering and eventual adoption if no reunions occurred. Through Petfinder.com all the animals released to KPC from Best Friends were ID'ed and photographed. Sadly, to date, there have been only 11 reunions and at this writing 20 dogs remain to be fostered from the original 140.

"As long as I have been Jetsunma's student she has always taught about Bodhichitta," reflects Ani Megan. "If we can follow the instructions of our teachers, we know compassionate activity can

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overcome all forms of suffering. I know we have changed the lives of these wonderful animals. And our lives have changed totally from this experience."

A week into the operation KPC established two rescue groups, Tara's Babies (www.tarasbabies.org), the animal rescue effort, and Buddhist Relief (www.Buddhistrelief.org) which helped Asian Buddhists in the Biloxi area with food and supplies. In many ways the animal rescue mission to the Gulf is an expansion of the Sedona-based Garuda Sanctuary. For over five years the sanctuary, initiated by Jetsunma, has housed and cared for over 35 abused exotic birds and rescued dogs from puppy mills. "In the end it is all of us who have received so many gifts from these loving dogs. They have move us to our core and offered us the chance to give and for that we are all very grateful," said Nydia Alexander.

For more information or to help with the ongoing mission of Tara's Babies please contact Ani Megan Gilana at 928.203.1700 or visit www.tarasbabies.org, or visit the KPC main website www.tara.org.

KPC says, "As Buddhists considering all life to be equally precious, we are training and offering



them, they'd lick our faces and wag their tails. They were so grateful for any attention. For all of us it was life altering. And we'd all do it all over again, and probably will."

KPC-Sedona sent two teams to New Orleans on the heels of Ani Pema and Ani Nydia. One monk, Tashi Dorje, and Norbu from the KPC Maryland sangha joined them. Nuns, monks and more lay people from KPC all converged at a private estate in Madisonville, Mississippi, an hour northeast of New Orleans, to set up a dog rescue staging area. Unbelievably, the owner had recently purchased the property and on it was a 20-foot stupa. Satellite telemetry had located the stupa address after a Google search looking for Buddhist groups or retreat centers in the New Orleans area



refuge to animals others can't keep or that have behavioral problems and would be euthanized by other organizations. And for these efforts we welcome one-time or ongoing financial support and volunteer help (866-574-9655)." ■

Counter-clockwise from top: KPC monk, Tashi Dorje, with a rescued friend at Dakini Valley; Katrina dogs being offloaded from a Continental 737 charter flight; Jane Middleton playing with newly fostered family dogs; Cain Fleming has just helped rescue New Orleans dogs covered in toxic sludge.