

# Destinations

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## **Champions for the Underdogs**

**M'Shoogy's Emergency Animal Rescue offers abused and abandoned animals a second chance at life.**

**October-November 1999**

In the corner of a room, a black dog lies on the floor, its head propped on a pillow. The fur on its hindquarters has been shaven off to prevent it from matting, giving the shivering dog a pathetic appearance. The chow mix, named BeeBee, is more than 14 years old, and her health is failing. As visitors enter the room, she neither raises her head nor makes a sound, prompting her owner, Gary Silverglat, to bend down and make sure she is still alive.

"You okay, BeeBee?" he asks as he gently strokes her head. She barely stirs from her sleep, but she is breathing and appears to be resting comfortably. Food is missing from her bowl, and this gives Gary hope that after a few days of rest, she may regain her health.

He's right. The next day, BeeBee is back on her feet and doing well. She is just one of the hundreds of animals that have been nurtured back to health by Gary and his wife, Lisa, during the past 14 years.

The couple operates M'Shoogy's Emergency Animal Rescue in Savannah, located 20 miles north of St. Joseph. Their mission is to rescue injured or abandoned animals. "We fight to save lives," Gary says. "Every animal and being on this planet only has one life. All beings deserve to have that life without suffering."

Gary scorns the suggestion that animals with medical problems, such as BeeBee, should be euthanized. Many of the animals he and Lisa save have impairments, ranging from being blind to missing limbs to suffering bouts of paralysis.

He says as long as these animals aren't in pain, there is no reason to kill them. "Anyone can kill," he says. "It takes a greater responsibility to save a life."

Gary is so passionate about his cause that he speaks quickly and firmly, as if he's trying to get his listeners to grasp the magnitude of the problem. While there are no statewide statistics on the number of animals euthanized, more than 8,000 animals were killed last year at just one Kansas City shelter. According to the Humane Society of the United

States, an estimated 4 to 6 million animals are euthanized nationwide each year. This number inflames Gary.

"Animal shelters don't really euthanize animals, they kill them," he says. "To euthanize means to put an animal out of its suffering. When an animal is killed because it has been abandoned, that is not euthanizing it. And I hate it when people say an animal is put to sleep. They are not put to sleep; they are killed."

Rick Smith, supervisor for St. Joseph's Animal Center and Rescue, says he shares Gary's desire to save animals but believes educating owners is a better solution than a no-kill policy. "I would not criticize what he is doing because I think his heart is in the right place," Rick says. "But I've been in the business long enough to know you can't save all the animals. I just wonder how many more animals could be spayed or neutered with the money they are using to save a few."

The expenditures do amount to an enormous sum. Gary, 58, and Lisa, 42, have spent more than \$5 million of their savings to cover the animals' medical, food, and housing expenses. Gary earned a bachelor's degree in animal husbandry and made his fortune by working in and owning various businesses, including a meat-packing plant. He is quick to point out that he isn't against the humane slaughtering of animals if it serves a purpose. It is the unnecessary abuse and suffering that he is out to stop.

Fourteen years ago, he and Lisa moved to the country outside of Savannah. Their home is off Route C, and it wasn't long before they noticed people dumping their dogs or cats and speeding away.

"As soon as an animal is abandoned, it is doomed right then," Gary says. "There is no food supply for it, and some farmers will shoot strays. It can get hit by a car, or predators will eat it." The Silverglats felt they had no choice but to take care of these animals.

This led to the opening of M'Shoogy's, named after a form of the Yiddish word for crazy. Lisa says the name fits because others think they are crazy to devote their lives to animals. They have poured so much time and money into their cause that they claim to have the largest no-kill animal emergency center in the world.

On 22 acres, the Silverglats house more than 600 dogs, 40 cats, a group of ducks, litters of raccoons, four emus, five horses, a few hawks, two cows, a rooster, and a deer. They have also rescued hogs, bobcats, goats, snakes, and foxes. "Everything here would be dead if we hadn't saved it," Gary says.

Behind their home they have put up 300 pens, each costing about \$500, to house all the dogs. The runs are 10-by-20 feet, and about three or four dogs are placed in each one according to their personalities. Walking down the rows, Gary can point to each dog, call it by name, and recite how it ended up in his care.

There's Choo-Choo, a scruffy white dog someone had chained to railroad tracks to meet a cruel death. Luckily, he was able to move a foot off the tracks to avoid the oncoming train. There's Scarface, a medium-sized, one-eyed black dog who barks at strangers. Someone took a gun and shot him in the face, but except for a slightly deformed head, he has regained his health. There's Tracks, a Walker coonhound who was hit by a car and left to die with broken bones and tire marks on his back. He has also recovered and is one of the smartest dogs Gary owns.

The abuse stories go on and on, each animal either hurt or abandoned by a human. And after witnessing countless horrors, the Silverglats admit they are wary of people. "After you do this for years, you have a lot of hate for your fellow man," Gary says.

Lisa agrees and says she is no longer the cheerful person she once was. "I used to go to church every Sunday and had a wonderful outlook on life. This has changed that. I can't say it's had a positive impact on me, but we have made a positive impact on the animal world."

The couple is appalled at how many people abandon their pets. And they have heard all the excuses from moving to starting a family to not having enough money. "Every excuse is lame," Gary says. "I tell people straight out that it's not a happy death. The animal is loyal to you. It's a beautiful creature that doesn't deserve to be treated that way. It isn't right.

"If kids are mistreated or injured, they go to foster homes. Animals should be sacred, too. There shouldn't be a double standard."

The Silverglats have taken it upon themselves to fight back for the animals. A few years ago, a change in a state law's wording no longer made it a misdemeanor for people to abandon their pets. This made it legal for people to dump their pets in the country or leave them chained up when they moved away. The Silverglats couldn't stand it. Gary spent long hours on the phone lobbying for the law to go back on the books. After a long fight, Gov. Mel Carnahan signed the bill into law in 1998.

Now, when the Silverglats witness an abandonment, they write down license plate numbers and report the incident so the irresponsible owners can be charged.

They won another battle when St. Joseph adopted an ordinance punishing irresponsible domestic animal breeders. The ordinance requires breeders to pay \$20 for a permit and holds them responsible for giving the litters the required vaccinations. Breeders who don't get a permit can be fined. The goal of this ordinance is to cut down on the number of litters being dumped at shelters. The city council voted to pass the ordinance, which Gary says creates a win-win situation.

"It brings in revenue for the city through fines," he says. "It guarantees the public that they aren't buying sick animals, and it stops the breeding. Every city in the U.S. should have this. We spend billions of dollars a year to kill animals that are the victims of irresponsible people. This could be stopped." A year after the ordinance passed, the number of animals killed at St. Joseph's animal shelter has dropped by 18 percent.

The Silverglats say educating the public is necessary in order to reduce the number of animals killed, so they enjoy talking with visitors at their sanctuary. They hope that some visitors will adopt an animal. For \$45, people can take home a pet that is spayed or neutered and has all of its shots. Gary and Lisa estimate that about 4,000 animals have been adopted out each year.

There is no hired help, so Gary, Lisa, and their 14-year-old son, Michael, do all the chores. A 17-year-old family friend, Jimmy Hoover, also helps out.

The foursome works long hours as it takes four hours just to feed and water the 600 dogs each day. They spend another two hours cleaning cages. During the hot days of summer, they have to continually wet down the dogs and refill the water bowls. In the winter, they have spent entire nights knocking the snow off the tarps that cover the pens. At any time, they can be called away from chores to respond to a plea to help get a dog off a highway or to rescue a starving horse.

The couple says the work has consumed their lives. Although Lisa says she sometimes dreams about using their money to fund vacations to exotic locations, she and Gary rarely leave their home except to run errands or rescue an animal. They have occasionally taken vacations to Branson, but they leave at 2 a.m. and return by 10 p.m. the same day so they can do their chores.

Although many people support their work, Gary and Lisa have their critics. They have received death threats from people angry about being reported for mistreating animals. They keep guns in the house for fear someone might act on a threat, and they have installed an electronic security system. But the animals also provide protection, as it would be hard for anyone to get near the house without causing the dogs to bark.

Others don't understand why the couple has invested so much time and money into animals. Some suggest the money could be better spent on humans. But the Silverglats respond that the government can intervene if children are being abused. This isn't always the case with animals.

Despite their somewhat negative view of mankind, the couple has opened their hearts to others. Besides raising Lisa's three children from a previous marriage, they have adopted two children who were living in a car. A few years ago, they also gave a released inmate a second chance by letting him live on their property and work for them.

They stepped in during these situations because they knew someone had to. "If someone knows something bad has happened and doesn't do anything about it, then they are no better than the person doing the harm," Gary says. "If a dog is dying or a child is getting abused, you have to get involved. If the public doesn't do it, we feel its effect from injured kids and animals to the type of world we live in."

For now, the Silverglats' time is spent trying to keep their business afloat. They are worried about depleting their entire savings and hope to find other funding sources. They have sought corporate sponsorships and donations, but so far, they have received little response.

Gary hopes the public will get behind his efforts to save these animals. He is tiring of the never-ending battle, and he says his spirits often plummet when he thinks about the horrors these animals have endured. Lisa says it surprises her that they have to work so hard to do something so good. But both say they have no regrets for how they've spent their time or money. "What is the sense of having money for greed? You've got to live and make the world a better place before you leave," Gary says.

The Silverglats say they will continue their mission as long as they are financially and physically able to do so. And when their own lives come to an end, they plan to be buried on the hill alongside the graves of the animals they once saved.

M'Shoogy's is open noon to 5:30 p.m. Monday through Saturday at 11519 State Route C. For more information, call (816) 324-5824.

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