

## **On the Positive: Of rats, mice and men**

**By Dr. Judy Long**

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Questions about good intentions always arise when an animal hoarding case comes to light. We already know that the host, originally an animal lover, has been turned into an animal abuser by the inexorable march of reproduction and thinning of resources.

Among the fastest reproducers, it seems, are rats and mice. From a single breeding pair there developed, over a period of months, a legion of free-ranging, omnivorous rodents that destroyed a rental home on the East Mesa and produced criminal charges for their host. Animal control officers removed 176 rats and went back for more. Neighbors had seen some of the rats, "bigger than my Chihuahua," as one reported.

The animal hoarding picture is familiar by now: mountains of feces, undernourished animals cannibalizing each other, a hoarder completely overwhelmed, with judgment problems. Now a public health problem, responsibility for the rat horde was shifted to an already overcrowded animal shelter. Immediate solutions seemed limited to consigning the rats for snake food or euthanasia.

Amazingly soon, animal rescue organizations all over the continent mobilized and opportunities for adoption sprouted like weeds. The 33 rats remaining at the shelter were taken to be fostered and ultimately adopted. The logistics involved triage and animal medicine and an airlift for the "ratties." A volunteer pilot flew to Seattle, with stops in Utah and Idaho. Other rescuers took the next lap, some to Oregon and some to Washington and then on to Canada. In the process, the rats received veterinary care (including spay/neuter) that had been denied them in their first home.

Some of those who mobilized had a lifetime history of knowing and living with animals of all kinds, including rats. Others involved themselves for the first time. Individuals with open minds found rats to be intelligent and curious, quickly learning to structure their lives in new environments. All those who had contact with the rats seemed to be touched by the chance to save a life.

In the process, the view of rats as lovable and affectionate pets emerged. A rat liberated from a psychology lab taught her rescuer how and when she wanted to be petted, much as our more familiar cats and dogs do.

Some readers may be thinking, "much ado about rodents." Others might think, "I'm glad I didn't have to be involved." Others might be thinking, "even as you do it for the least of these, my brothers. ..." This is only part of the range of responses individuals may have to problems that challenges us collectively: animal overpopulation, animal dumping and animal cruelty.

The story of the "ratties" has a happy ending. But the question of human responsibility continues to haunt me, and will be the subject of future columns.

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