Exploring our Complex Relationships with Animals

Evidence-Based Practice Forum
A badly injured child regains strength and self-confidence while riding horseback. A prisoner learns patience and responsibility as he cares for a rescue dog. An elderly woman is assisted in hoarding more than 100 sick and malnourished cats in her home. An abusive husband terrifies his wife by killing her beloved pet.

Human-animal relationships, both positive and negative, are every bit as complex as those we share with our fellow humans.

Today, with newly appointed American Humane Endowed Chair Frank R. Ascione, PhD as GSSW’s American Humane Endowed Chair. The $2 million Endowed Chair, established in 2008 by the American Humane Association, is the first for GSSW and one of the first in the nation created to explore the expanding field of animal-assisted social work and research the bond between humans and animals. Ascione also serves as Executive Director of GSSW’s Institute for Human-Animal Connection, another recipient of substantial financial support from American Humane.

“Joining the GSSW faculty as the first American Humane Endowed Chair is a distinct honor and an unparalleled opportunity,” says Ascione, whose family was on hand for the event. The installation, which included a lecture by Ascione on his recent research, was followed by a gala reception.

 faculty staff and students joined University administrators and other honored guests in October, 2009, to celebrate the installation of Professor Frank R. Ascione, PhD, as GSSW’s American Humane Endowed Chair. The $2 million Endowed Chair, established in 2008 by the American Humane Association, is the first for GSSW and one of the first in the nation created to explore the expanding field of animal-assisted social work and research the bond between humans and animals. Ascione also serves as Executive Director of GSSW’s Institute for Human-Animal Connection, another recipient of substantial financial support from American Humane.

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Before coming to GSSW, Ascione was a professor in the Psychology Department at Utah State University in Logan, as well as an adjunct professor in Family and Human Development. He is an internationally acclaimed researcher, lecturer and author.

"Dr. Ascione is the perfect scholar to lead the kind of rigorous research this endowment will allow," says Dean James Herbert Williams. "American Humane and DU have forged a dynamic partnership to advance research nationally into the human-animal bond."

Ascione also serves on the Child and Animal Abuse Prevention Advisory Council of the Latham Foundation, is past president of the Southwestern Society for Research in Human Development; and is a member of the cadre of experts for The American Psychological Association’s Presidential Task Force on Violence and the Family. He has been a visiting professor at GSSW since December, 2008.

The human-animal connection

EXPLORING OUR COMPLEX RELATIONSHIPS WITH ANIMALS

by American Humane Endowed Chair Frank R. Ascione, PhD

My more recent research, published in 2007, shows that animal abuse is ten times more likely to occur in homes with domestic violence than in non-violent homes. This work was replicated in a 2008 Australian study that used the assessment methods developed in my research.

Those of us studying this phenomenon also found that victims of domestic violence delayed seeking shelter at battered women’s programs out of concern for their pets’ welfare. This knowledge has helped to increase the number of shelters willing to admit the pets of the domestic violence victims they house. Additionally, a number of states now include pets in orders of protection or restraining orders. At this writing, similar legislation is pending in Colorado.

My current research progresses on two paths. In collaboration with the Colorado Coalition against Domestic Violence, I recently submitted an application for research funding to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (one of the National Institutes of Health) to better understand the effects of exposure to both domestic violence and animal abuse on children’s mental health. I am also working with my GSSW colleagues and the National Adult Protective Services Association to continue examining animal welfare and abuse issues among older adults.

Meanwhile, I see almost unlimited possibilities for our Institute for Human-Animal Connection in both teaching and research. Our vision for the future includes:

• expanding the integration of animal-assisted curriculum content into each of the five MSW practice tracks (child welfare, high-risk youth, families, adulthood and life challenges, and community practice);
• enhancing our reputation as a center for the study and dissemination of information about evidence-based practices and scholarly research; this includes developing funding resources for research and community-based programs, developing community collaborations, enhancing doctoral student mentoring and training, hosting conferences and symposia, establishing IHAC as an information clearinghouse and facilitating development of an advisory council, our Scholars-in-Residence program and IHAC Fellows;
• continuing development of a research focus on problems in human-animal relations, as well as prevention and intervention programs directed at human and animal welfare;
• exploring emerging opportunities for research, training and applications in conservation social work, i.e., expanding the social work-ecological model to include respectful appreciation of natural environments and resources, nonhuman animals, and environmental health and sustainability;
• serving as a model for the ethical treatment of animals in research and practice.

We have set an ambitious agenda for IHAC, one that we cannot begin to achieve in isolation. We invite interested alumni and friends of GSSW to learn more about our efforts and to consider supporting our work.

Learn how you can support the Institute for Human-Animal Connection on page 18. Visit IHAC online at www.humananimalconnection.org.

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Why should social workers study human-animal interactions? And why are there an increasing number of people in all helping professions choosing to add animal-assisted interventions to their clinical skills?

Consider that more American children currently live in a home with a companion animal than with a father. Early proper care of animals has been found to be supportive of healthy child social-emotional learning and a protective factor in healthy child development. Conversely, cruelty to animals has been correlated with the development of anti-social attitudes and increased risk for violent behavior. Across the lifespan, the quality of people’s relationships with animals appears to be an important measure of their quality of life.

In therapeutic settings, animals can enhance and expedite rapport-building and trust. The presence of animals stimulates communication with individuals who are socially marginalized, isolated, or no longer trust human relationships. Animals provide a socially normative source for touch and physical contact while reducing blood pressure, anxiety, loneliness, and depression. They have been shown to decrease the debilitating impacts of trauma and stress-related conditions, as exemplified by the psychiatric service dogs that assist combat veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Animal-assisted therapy can address cognitive and perceptual deficits and assist clients to self-regulate, develop empathy, provide inspiration and motivation, socialize, help maintain the quality of life of people with disabilities, reduce aggressive behaviors and increase social participation, provide inspiration and motivation, socialize, help maintain the quality of life of people with disabilities, reduce aggressive behaviors and increase social participation. Animal-assisted therapy can address cognitive and perceptual deficits and assist clients to self-regulate, develop empathy, provide inspiration and motivation, socialize, help maintain the quality of life of people with disabilities, reduce aggressive behaviors and increase social participation.

Another key element of the AASW Certificate is that our students understand the interrelationship between themselves, their families, and their communities, including the natural environment and its non-human inhabitants. For the first time this academic year, our students had the opportunity to enroll in a course that included two weeks of experiential service learning in Kenya. This innovative course explored the relationship between displaced persons and the unsustainable activities of poaching, bushmeat trade and their detrimental impact on wildlife and local communities.

In short, animal-assisted social work is a relational and learned helplessness and encourage optimism, a sense of focus and attention, reduce aggressive behaviors and increase social participation. Animal-assisted therapy can address cognitive and perceptual deficits and assist clients to self-regulate, develop empathy, provide inspiration and motivation, socialize, help maintain the quality of life of people with disabilities, reduce aggressive behaviors and increase social participation.
An Activist for Animals and People

Foundation year MSW student Shelby McDonald first saw the horrific effects of animal abuse as a middle-school Humane Society volunteer. It hit her even harder when, years later, she adopted Kozmo Kraner from a shelter and realized the border collie/greyhound mix had cigarette burns on his back. Still, it took a while before McDonald knew she was destined for a career that would help not only abused and neglected animals, but people as well.

“I started off wanting to be a vet,” she recalls, “but then I realized you can’t change anything for animals until you change people…” Thus McDonald, a third-year graduate psychology major, eventually enrolled in a doctoral program in that same field. Seven months into the dissertation, she realized something was missing.

“Being an activist for vulnerable populations is what drives me as a person,” she says. McDonald took a two-year break from academia, then discovered GSSW and its Institute for Human-Animal Connection. Now she’s leading her first-year internship at IHAC and couldn’t be happier. “GSSW is in the only place I could go and do exactly what I wanted to do,” says McDonald. “This has been an amazing experience for me.”

McDonald’s internship centers on IHAC’s Colorado LINK Project, an effort funded by the Animal Assistance Foundation to examine how animal abuse may be related to interpersonal violence and other crimes. The project’s goal is to enhance prevention and treatment methods used by law enforcement, human services, animal-control and other professions, establishing Colorado as a national model for handling abuse cases.

Since pet owners tend to think of their pets as family members, McDonald explains, “violence against pets is an act of family violence.” Social workers who don’t make that connection may miss crucial information about child abuse and other interpersonal violence within the families they serve.

The key says McDonald, is education—something she sees herself providing in the future as a professor and scholar in the field.

Bridge Kids Making a Difference

If you were in Denver’s public housing neighborhoods last summer you might have noticed something unusual: teams of elementary school kids wearing official-looking orange vests and using enormous glue guns to attach labels to storm drains. Their efforts, aimed at keeping rodents from dumping toxic substances into the drains, were part of an environmentally focused humane education program implemented at GSSW’s Bridge Project in affiliation with the international organization, Roots & Shoots.

A program of the Jane Goodall Institute, Roots & Shoots is a youth-driven global network whose service learning projects promote care and concern for animals, the environment and the human community. Mandy Jeffries (MSW ’09), Health Case Manager at the Bridge Project, first heard about the program from Professor Philip Federnich. Jeffries registered as a Roots & Shoots group leader, then worked with “Roots,” at three bridge sites to identify and remedy a neighborhood problem.

“I wanted the kids to take ownership,” says Jeffries, “so I let them come up with the plan.”

The children first mapped the storm drains in their communities and tested water using kits donated by Denver-based nonprofit FrontRange Earth Force. When they researched where water from the storm drains ended up, the kids were surprised to discover it flowed straight into the city’s rivers and creeks without ever passing through a water treatment facility. The group sought the help of Denver’s Public Works Department, which provided the glue guns, tools and even the snazzy orange vests.

On a hot July day, the children split up into teams and glued warning labels on as many drains as they could.

Bridge undertook three other Roots & Shoots projects during the past year, led by GSSW student interns earning GSSW’s Certificate in Animal-Assisted Social Work.

Kelsey Hopson, Health Case Manager at the Bridge Project, led a contest to create a design for reusable shopping bags and a neighborhood trash and recycling inventory they hope will convince the City of Denver to provide recycling services in the city’s public housing neighborhoods. Both Hopson and McClurken plan to graduate from GSSW in June.

“The children who participate in these projects really take pride in what they accomplish,” says Jeffries. “They know they’re making a difference in their own neighborhoods and in other communities as well.”

GSSW’s Bridge Project has served children and their families in Denver’s public housing neighborhoods since 1991. Learn more at www.du.edu/bridgeproject.

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