DOING THE LAUNDRY IS A LABOR OF LOVE FOR PLANO'S LORI BIRDSONG

BY AMY SANDLING CRAWFORD OF THE PLANO PROFILE



It all started with tennis balls.

Several years ago, Plano resident Lori Birdsong was playing tennis at a local club and noticed that staff members were discarding tennis balls deemed too worn for use at the club. Birdsong asked if she could have the balls, then packaged them up in baskets to deliver to local animal shelters. She figured each adopted animal could go home with a new “toy” as part of an adoption.

But while visiting shelters to drop off the balls, Birdsong was told that toys were fine, but what shelters really needed were linens for the animals. Shelter workers said there is always a shortage of sheets and blankets to line cat and dog cages, and towels and incontinence pads to help with messes and cleanups.

And with that, the idea for Linens for Animals was born. Birdsong did some research and discovered that regional laundry facilities usually handle all laundry services for hospitals, nursing homes, and other care centers. Birdsong started making phone calls and pounding the pavement looking for donations. Birdsong has since built relationships with linens services ensuring a steady supply of much-needed items. She takes linen orders from shelters and rescue groups via her website—linensforanimals.org—then places orders with her linen facilities contacts each week. Then, once per week, those needing linens either meet Birdsong at a linen facility or come to Birdsong’s Plano home to pick up their orders.

“We have acquired and donated almost 2 million pounds of hospital sanitized linens to

date," she said. "Almost 2,000 wildlife rehab facilities and rescue groups in 19 states have benefited. Our mission is to provide comfort to animals in need."

IN ADDITION...



..to her work in the North Texas area, Birdsong is passionate about serving animals across the country, and she's eager to teach others her process of collecting and distributing linens in communities nationwide. She said that the dedicated involvement of large laundry facilities across the United States will help change the lives of hundreds of thousands of animals in only a few short months.

"Nineteen states have our linens today," said Birdsong, "and because word is spreading, we have the opportunity to educate groups in at least 10 other states, teaching them to do what we do. It is our wish to be in every community in the United States. I recently had a conversation with one of the largest laundry facilities in the country. It disturbs them greatly to see used linens go to the dump or to see linens sold for pennies on the dollar. Companies like this have even had to pay to have their linens taken to the dump. But when you show them the benefit of donating their linens to help animals in need, they are so eager, so happy to help!"

Birdsong grew up in the Dallas area, then lived in New York and Los Angeles. There, she acted and ran an event production company, but then she met someone that changed her life and the life of her Doberman pinscher, Lakoda—Certified Veterinary Chiropractitioner Dr. Mark Bussan. After Lakoda had a negative reaction to medication following major surgery, Birdsong contacted Bussan—whom she'd only met once —and begged him to

save her dog...and he did. Birdsong and Bussan were married shortly thereafter.

“He is an angel with wings the size of an airplane,” enthused Birdsong. “I am so in love with the most amazing man that God ever created. He puts up with me and the things that I come up with, and he works with me on this mission every day.”

SHORTLY AFTER...



..they married, the couple moved to Texas and now live on three acres in East Plano that allow them to run Linens for Animals out of their home and pursue their passion. Bussan also continues to travel around North Texas serving animals with his veterinary chiropractic skills. “He specializes in equine work and also dogs and cats,” explained Birdsong. “But he has also worked on does and other various types of animals. He uses modern modalities and nutrition therapy that is just amazing. I have seen him take animals from a paralyzed state, to just fine and running around.”

In addition to operating Linens for Animals, the duo built a no-kill animal shelter in McKinney about a year and a half ago after Birdsong met animal rescue activist Dedra Shaver, who at that time was doing rescue work out of her home. “We purchased five acres of raw land in McKinney, then developed and built the most amazing shelter. We have an indoor/outdoor dog kennel, a two-story lofted cat barn, a small isolation barn, and a mobile home,” said Birdsong. “I have been doing rescue for 19 years and could not imagine myself doing anything else,” added Shaver, who is now the manager for the Linens for Animals no-kill animal sanctuary. “I would like someone to carry on when I can no longer do it. That is why I want to teach the kids of tomorrow how to care for animals and learn what joy these animals bring.”

Volunteers of all ages are always welcome.

“Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses, but we have something for everyone here,” said Shaver. “You can walk, water, feed, brush, and bathe dogs. We have five play runs so people can have one-on-one time with a dog of their choosing. In the cat barn, the cat lover

can play with the kitties and be calmed by their purrs. Laundry is never ending...the washing, the drying, the folding. And last but not least, there is ‘poo’ to pick up!”

THE SANCTUARY...



..has also partnered with the Collin County juvenile probation department, allowing youth to fulfill community service hours by volunteering at the sanctuary. “We have really cute kids walking [our shelter] dogs,” said Birdsong. “The animals are helping the kids, and the kids are helping the animals.”

Birdsong is quick to sing Shaver’s praises. “She is taking care of more than 100 animals on a daily basis. We have no sponsors, no grants, no donors—we just put in a lot of hard work.”

“I didn’t start doing this for people,” added Birdsong. “When people come here to do a pick up, they just start bawling. They could never imagine that there is such wealth available for these animals. I have never seen such gratitude, such humanity. I see it every day. There are a million ways people can help. Sometimes people are scared to get involved. Fostering is a wonderful way to help animals, but if you don’t want to do that, you can do pet food drives, collect funds. Community service used to be a way of life. Neighbors used to help each other. What happened to that? What happened to neighborly love? It’s time to get back to that. We’re part of this community and we care about this community. We’ll do whatever we can to serve in every community in the United States, but it all starts right here in Plano.”

And the tennis balls? They’re still a part of the picture. Birdsong said they still give away tennis balls every week with their linen deliveries…but the picture has just gotten a whole lot bigger than that.

Interested in volunteering? Want to know more? Birdsong is on a mission to provide comfort to all animals in need. For her, that means spreading the word about her program and assisting others in starting their own Linen Recycling Program. Here are a few steps you can take to start one:

Recruit volunteers with time, vehicles, and physical strength for linen pickup.

Identify a central location with parking for linen distribution.

Establish or partner with a nonprofit organization so the linen source receives a tax deduction.

Request donations from the rescue organizations that receive linens to cover gas expenses.

Be creative in seeking linen sources, such as hospitals, nursing homes, and hotels.

Don’t be afraid to ask for help!

Be sure to thank the linen donors and provide them with stories and photos showing the linens benefiting animals.

Publicize the program; make your truck or van into a rolling billboard.

Remember: It’s all about the animals!

Contact Lori Birdsong at 310-721-3933