

## Helping the Helpless



*Dixon's Jeannie Cornelius recognized for work with animals*

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When Jeannie Cornelius moved to the Dixon area, from Georgia, her goal was to make art and leave behind the work of looking after abandoned and abused animals.

That idea didn't last long. She quickly reshaped her plans about 35 years ago, after coming across an animal that needed help.

Since then, Cornelius has rescued thousands of dogs and cats as an individual, and through the nonprofit she

eventually established, the Dixon Animal Protection Society — commonly referred to as DAPS.

Through the years, she said she's spent thousands of dollars paying for food and getting the animals spayed or neutered and exhausted countless hours transporting animals to safety. "We have driven puppies to shelters in Colorado where the spay/neuter consciousness is so great," Cornelius said.

Most of the work she has done improving the lives of area animals went unnoticed until March 14. That's when a representative from the New Mexico Veterinary Medical Association, Dr. Julie Blossom, stopped by the Arroyo Seco Animal Hospital to honor Cornelius for her efforts. Blossom presented the animal protection advocate with the 2016 Lay Award for Humanitarian Endeavors.

Since 1990, the Veterinary Association has presented the award to citizens "who have distinguished themselves through humanitarian efforts involving and

promoting human/animal bond.”

Cornelius was one of several potential recipients nominated by veterinarians from across the state.

Animal Hospital veterinarian Sally Brant nominated Cornelius. She wrote in the nomination memo, that Cornelius deserved the award because of her unwavering commitment to the humane treatment of animals.

“For over 30 years, she has served Rio Arriba and Taos county communities as a spay/neuter advocate, an educator of young and old in humane animal care and provider of funds for sterilization and medical and surgical care for hundreds of animals in one of the poorest areas of the state,” Brant wrote. “She has gotten grants, donations and used her personal income to support these efforts. She has spent a lifetime being a compassionate advocate of animal life.”

Cornelius said looking after needy animals is second nature and something she sees as an obligation of sorts.

“I was going to come here and be a spiritual potter,” she said. “But within a week, I found a stray cat in the dumpster. I have had up to 80 animals in one year.”

She did make pottery, lots of it, and used the money she earned to provide for the animals she rescued along Northern New Mexico’s desolate roads and arroyos.

## Early years

Luckily, for Cornelius, she didn’t do it alone.

Since day one, she has had help from people, such as neighbors Hallie Hayden, Adele Zimmerman and Judy Pearson, who share her common interest.

“Adele Zimmerman has been my ‘on call’ and go-to person for most of these 34 years,” Cornelius said. “Judy Pearson came on board about four years ago and now takes calls and rescues, helps raise funds, etc., as I am teaching during the day.”

She met one of the ladies, shortly after her arrival in Dixon, while fighting to improve the conditions and outcomes for animals at the Española Animal Shelter.

“I met Hallie Hayden when a group called Friends of St. Francis took over the Española Shelter many years ago,” Cornelius said, explaining the deep bond she has with her fellow advocates.

Hayden recently passed away.

For approximately 16 years, from 1981 to 1997, Cornelius and her small band

of animal advocates used their personal income to help animals in need. Most of those years, Cornelius and her husband, Bob, lived off of his earnings, which allowed her to continue working with the animals.

“My husband is a carpenter — a very patient one — and we survived on his income,” she said.

The couple got a bit of financial relief in 1997, when she incorporated the Dixon Animal Protection Society.

The benefits of starting the organization, for a time, eased the financial stress because they were able to solicit donations that would benefit those who contributed.

“When DAPS became a 501(c)3 organization, I was able to write grants and donors were able to have a tax write-off for charitable contributions,” Cornelius said. “DAPS is truly a grassroots organization depending solely on the kindness of humans who care about the welfare of animals.”

As the financial strain once again surfaced, Cornelius found herself returning to a profession she had left 25 years earlier. It was a profession that would give her more than enough opportunities to share the humanitarian spirit.

“I went back to teaching in 2001 in order to help pay off the animal debt and also help fund DAPS,” she said. “Teaching has been a great way to connect with my community on animal issues and it is also just plain fun to be with the children. A great move.”