

STROKE VICTIM REGAINS HER HEALTH BUT LOSES HER 'KIDS'

Barbara Yost

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When Judith Abbott comes to Phoenix, she drives slowly, scrutinizing every dog on the street for the right markings: four white paws, a black mask across the eyes, a gray stripe down the nose.

Abbott is looking for her "children."

Until February 2004, Abbott and her five Siberian huskies were a family. They lived in Buffalo, Wyo., sometimes in a house and sometimes camping in Abbott's 1989 Dodge pickup. Townsfolk knew her "kids."

Best friend Linda Luckjohn hoped she was as good with her own children as Abbott was with her dogs. The dogs were Abbott's life.

But Abbott is alone now. While she was recuperating from a stroke suffered in Arizona, four of her dogs were adopted without her knowledge or permission. Another was put down.

No other dogs will do for Abbott, who recovered from the stroke and returned to Buffalo. She has hired a paralegal and a private investigator, filed lawsuits and spent hours cruising the streets of Phoenix in hopes of spotting a familiar muzzle.

She believes the dogs are looking for her, too. Last year, she says, Nanook, her first and favorite husky, appeared as a vision in the doorway of her apartment. She believes it was his spirit trying to communicate with her.

Abbott is not a religious woman, but she believes in a higher power and prays to St. Francis, patron saint of animals, to bring back her dogs.

So far, St. Francis has not answered her prayers.

Stricken at campsite

In winter 2004, Abbott, 70, a retired postal worker, was camping with her dogs in Quartzsite. Wyoming is too cold to spend winter in a truck, so she liked to bring the dogs south to campsites on Bureau of Land Management property. Sometimes it was Quartzsite, sometimes Yuma.

On the way back from the grocery store one morning in February, Abbott caught Nanook staring at her with his piercing, bicolored eyes.

"What's wrong, Nanook?" she asked.

The dog never broke his gaze.

At the campsite, Abbott began writing a letter to a cousin. She wrote three checks. She got out of the truck to check on the dogs' water, and everything went black.

It seemed strange to the couple at the next campsite not to hear the five dogs barking later in the day when Abbott customarily gave them their afternoon snack. They discovered the dogs in the truck cab and Abbott lying unconscious on a bed of rocks, which had gouged a wound through skin and muscle on her back. The couple called police and paramedics.

In Parker, Murrell Rodgers, La Paz County animal-control officer, got a call from the Sheriff's Department to come pick up five huskies.

Rodgers, now retired, was running a small operation with just 18 kennels and scant room for guest dogs. But he found room for Nanook and the others in adjoining kennels, where they could see or hear each other.

For two months, Rodgers and his staff of volunteers tried to locate friends or relatives of Abbott who could take care of her dogs. He found no one, and no foster homes were available.

Rodgers waited longer than the law requires and then made a decision.

Lonely life

Except for her dogs, Abbott hasn't had many close relationships. Born in Washington, D.C., she was raised on a farm in Maryland with her mother and stepfather. After her stepfather died, Abbott and her mother moved to Virginia.

Abbott found work in an oral surgeon's office. She married and had a son.

In 1962, Abbott, divorced after less than two years of marriage, moved with some friends to Las Vegas; they had dreams of becoming showgirls. Instead, Abbott took a job at the post office and worked there until she retired in 1992. For a while, she lived in Prescott and worked for the Postal Service there.

After her son graduated from high school, he struck out on his own. David would be 49 now, but she hasn't seen him in 10 or 15 years.

Abbott lived alone until she remembered a photograph of a husky she had cut out of a magazine years before. She'd always thought huskies were smart, handsome dogs. In 1993, after she had retired and had time for a dog, Abbott adopted Nanook, a little black-and-white ball of fur. She and the puppy became inseparable.

The two traveled the country, looking for a place to call home. No town felt right until Abbott discovered Buffalo, population 4,256, roughly halfway between the Black Hills of South Dakota and Wyoming's Yellowstone National Park.

She bought a house, a big house with a yard for Nanook.

'Please don't kill my dogs'

The stroke that Abbott suffered in Quartzsite last year left her partially paralyzed and barely able to speak. She woke up at John C. Lincoln Hospital in Phoenix with nurses talking to her in words she couldn't understand. Pain medication left her in a fog.

Four weeks later, she underwent surgery to repair a heart valve apparently damaged by an infection contracted during dental surgery several years ago. Doctors believe the infection had caused her stroke.

Abbott began to regain some movement but often hallucinated because of the morphine administered to her. One morning came a phone call that was all too real. It snapped her out of her fog.

"Are you Judith Abbott?" a woman asked.

"Yes."

"I'm with Animal Control in Parker. Do you want us to euthanize your dogs?"

Judith screamed as best she could. "No! Please don't kill my dogs."

"Well, someone's got to take care of them."

In Parker, Murrell Rodgers was saddened. With four dogs of his own, he couldn't bear to euthanize the five beautiful huskies. But he had word from Abbott's nurses that she probably would not recover, at least not well enough to care for her dogs.

Rodgers phoned the Arizona Humane Society in Phoenix and was certain the dogs would find good homes. He told staffers there what had happened to the owner and that she had been living in her car. He said she was not expected to live.

On March 26, Rodgers brought the dogs to the Humane Society as part of Project Reach Out, which spares homeless dogs from death row.

"We'll do our best to adopt them out," AHS Chief Executive Officer Cheryl Naumann promised Rodgers.

One of the dogs, suffering hip dysplasia, was put down. The others found new families in the Valley.

For the Humane Society, it was an all-too-familiar situation in which owners leave no instructions for the care of their pets.

Breaking the news

Abbott spent a month in the hospital and a month in rehab. She'd always been a survivor and fought not only for her life but to regain mobility. She had her dogs to live for.

When Abbott was released from rehab, a social worker handed the financially strapped woman a pair of shoes and a set of used clothing - no underwear - and \$35 for a bus ticket to pick up her truck from a towing yard in Ehrenberg, west of the Valley.

The social worker also gave her the news: "By the way," she said, "your dogs have been adopted."

Abbott despaired. She and her kids had been a team, literally. Wyoming is sled-dog country, and Siberian huskies are bred to run. Once Abbott had one husky, she dreamed of having a team and began searching in animal shelters for abandoned dogs.

Kayla Marie had come from the local pound, Cheyenne from the Humane Society.

Using tips from Mushing magazine, Abbott bought a sled, harnesses and a tow line. The first time she hitched up the team and yelled, "Hike!" the three pups took off in different directions.

Abbott needed a lead dog. Her ad in Mushing found Shadow, a 1 1/2-year-old experienced musher from Seattle. Shipping him to Buffalo cost her \$156, but he proved to be the spark her team needed. This time when she yelled, "Hike!" Shadow led the team in a burst of speed. The others learned quickly.

One day, she heard about Zorro, a 5-month-old husky pup with a black mask across his eyes. Zorro had been abused and was skittish around Abbott for weeks. She knew she had won him over when he came to her and leaned his head against her chest.

Friends such as Luckjohn began visiting Abbott as much to see the dogs as to see her. When she and her kids took her typewriter to be repaired, the shop owner smiled at the brood.

"You've got a nice little family there," he said.

By September last year, Abbott was well enough to begin looking for her dogs. She wrote letters to Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano, Wyoming Gov. David Freudenthal and Arizona Sen.

John McCain, to no avail.

'What have you done?'

On Labor Day, she drove back to Parker to confront Rodgers.

"What have you done with my dogs?" she asked.

"I took them to the Humane Society," he told her and explained why.

Abbott went to Phoenix and demanded that the Humane Society return her dogs. She was told one had been put down. The others were in loving homes and were part of those families now. All of the families had been contacted, and none wanted to give up the dogs.

Like Rodgers, Humane Society officials said they had kept the dogs longer than required and had no recourse but to find them new homes before Abbott contacted them.

Abbott took legal action, filing a suit in small-claims court in Parker charging the wrongful taking of her dogs. After spending months in Parker, she was told by a judge to get a lawyer. She paid an attorney \$2,500, but he missed a filing deadline and Abbott lost most of her money.

The Internet led her to **Valley private investigator Mike Davis and paralegal Steve Wyner**. In May, Wyner met Abbott at a Village Inn on Bell Road in Phoenix.

She asked him, "Do you know what it's like to lose a dog?"

He did. Just a week before, Wyner had had to euthanize his own family dog, Jacques. He took Abbott's case.

Wyner is not an attorney and can't legally represent Abbott. His job was to help her file court documents to compel the Humane Society to reveal information about the whereabouts of her dogs. For weeks, the Humane Society did not respond to lawsuits filed in Maricopa County Superior Court, though deadlines passed and resulted in a default judgment that would force it to give Abbott the information requested.

Finally, the Humane Society filed a response, asking that the default judgment be set aside. That would put Abbott back on track for a trial.

Wyner is emotionally invested in the case, though he's losing money. Abbott is not wealthy. He's given up thinking he'll be paid for his time. But he knows what it means to lose a dog.

Abbott still winters in Arizona. She has traded her truck for a GMC Suburban. She dreams of buying a Bigfoot motorhome because she doesn't have a house in Buffalo anymore. Then she and the kids could stay in Wyoming year round.

Luckjohn has tried to persuade Abbott to find new dogs. Abbott thinks that's like telling parents to replace a child they've lost.

At the least, she wants Nanook back before he dies. He's the one she raised from a pup.

Abbott likes the people of Buffalo; they're "giving" people, she says. But she can't settle back home until she finds her family.

So she keeps driving the streets of Phoenix, looking every dog in the eye until the right one looks back.