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By VERA LAWLOR

Hilda lay on top of a pile of rotting animal carcasses behind the Lancaster Stockyards in Pennsylvania. Flies and maggots crawled all over her body, and it wasn't until she lifted her head, and looked in the direction of Lorri Bauston and Gene Baur that they realized the sheep was alive. The animal rights activists were at the stockyards investigating animal cruelty cases and they immediately swept up the sheep and took her to a veterinarian.

Hilda — it turned out — had collapsed because of the brutal transportation conditions she had to endure on the way to the stockyard. Twenty minutes after arriving at the animal hospital she stood up and started to eat and drink. While Hilda recovered, Baur and Bauston tracked down the trucker who had transported the sheep. The driver admitted to dragging Hilda off of the truck, and dumping her on top of the pile of dead animals because she was a downer — that's the word used for animals too weak or injured to stand, and therefore not worth anything in the eyes of dealers.

"We were just learning about the treatment of farm animals. We thought for sure since the trucker had admitted to the act of cruelty, we would be able to get local law enforcement authorities to prosecute but we were wrong," said Gene Baur during a recent phone interview. "They claimed that normal agricultural practices were exempt from Pennsylvania anti-cruelty laws."

Dumping live farm animals on dead piles was considered normal. That was in 1986 and it prompted Baur and Bauston — who were married at the time but have since separated — to found Farm Sanctuary Inc., a non-profit organization that would work to rescue abused or abandoned farm animals while at the same time working to institute laws to protect these animals.

The couple kept Hilda in their backyard while they saved every dollar they could, selling vegetarian hotdogs, organizing walk-a-thons, and living on \$50 a week. In three years they had enough to purchase a 175-acre farm in Watkins Glen. In 1993, a Farm Sanctuary member donated a 300-acre property in California so they could open a second sanctuary. Today Farm Sanctuary has more than 100,000 members and cares for hundreds of farm animals who were rescued from abusive situations.

The organization is directly responsible for the implementation of several anti-cruelty laws to protect farm animals. For example, Farm Sanctuary documentation of farm animals being abused has led to the passing of the first state law to ban cruelties such as dragging or abandoning "downed" animals, and the organizations investigative campaigns have led to the first cruelty convictions of stockyards, factory farms, and slaughterhouses.

While these cruelty investigators and legislative campaigners are on the road doing their job, other Farm Sanctuary staff members are busy caring for the rescued animals. Hilda

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was the first animal to call the sanctuary home, and lived on the Watkins Glen farm for 11 years until she died of old age. She is buried at the sanctuary. During her lifetime she touched the hearts and minds of millions of people, Baur said. Among them, legislators and policy makers who were moved to introduce federal and state legislation banning other “downed” animals from being subjected to the same fate as Hilda. People who read her story in papers, and visitors of all ages who met Hilda at the sanctuary were also touched by her story. Today the sanctuary provide refuge for not only sheep but also cows, pigs, chickens, turkeys, and goats to name but a few.

“It is never going to be possible for us — or any other animal sanctuary — to save the lives of all farm animals,” Baur said. “But the ones that come to live here are safe and they act as ambassadors for all those we can’t save.”

Thousands of visitors are given tours of the sanctuaries every year and they leave with a new understanding about farm animals. Some go home and reconsider their diet becoming vegetarian or vegans; others join Farm Sanctuary in its campaign against farm animal cruelty. All staff members, interns, or guests who stay in the rental cabins at the sanctuaries are required to eat only vegan meals out of respect for the animals.

“When visitors come here they look into the eyes of the animals and they realize that they have feelings just like we do; they feel joy and they feel pain,” Baur said. “People are really transformed by that experience.”

Rescued animals are also transformed after a few months at the shelter, although it takes some longer than others.

“It really depends on the animal and the amount of abuse they have had to endure before they arrive here,” said Susie Coston, Shelter Manager.

Some animals, she said, quickly learn that the sanctuary staff and visitors are their friends and they relax and begin to enjoy life. Others, like Cincinnati Freedom, a cow who escaped from a slaughterhouse, and was on the run for several days, is less trusting.

“She’s a big girl, and very strong, and farmers tend to be more cruel to larger animals because they feel the need to control them,” Coston said. “Cincinnati Freedom has been with us for four years. I can get up close to her now but if I put her in a situation where she feels trapped, she gets scared and will jump or break through a fence to get away.”

Traumatized pigs also take a while to settle down. Coston recalls a particularly traumatic rescue when the sanctuary went to collect pigs that were squashed together in a three-tier truck that had been abandoned on the roadside during transportation to a slaughterhouse. Under those forced conditions many of the pigs had fought with one another.

“I was there when they opened the truck and those pigs were terrified,” Coston said. “They had been separated in the dark their whole lives, and now the first time they were put together they were packed tight in a truck to be sent to slaughter.” Farm Sanctuary took 40 of the pigs, and it took two weeks before they could calm down, Coston said.

“No matter how bad they felt, they didn’t want to be touched by us; instead they bonded with each other,” Coston added “We see that with all of the animals here, they don’t like to be separated from their own kind.”

Once animals settle down and understand that the sanctuary is a safe haven, they relish hugs and kisses from visitors. The huge cows greet people who stroll across the pasture to meet them while gigantic pigs grunt in satisfaction when their bellies are rubbed.

“Farmers who come here and see people bonding with our animals are amazed, and caution us that the big cows and pigs can lash out at people,” Coston said. “We tell them that, yes, if these animals are kicked and beaten and treated badly, of course they will try to defend themselves.”

At Farm Sanctuary the animals find only peace and love and that brings out the best in people and animals.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP FARM ANIMALS & THE ANIMAL SANCTUARY

Adopt an animal at the sanctuary.

Help to educate others about farm animal abuses by distributing educational literature.

The Farm Sanctuary will provide the pamphlets.

Get involved in legislative bills by letting politicians know where you stand on animal welfare issues. The Farm Sanctuary is currently working on a number of different campaigns and welcomes support of members and animal rights supporters.

Pay a visit to the sanctuary during one of its festive weekends to meet the animals, learn about its campaign work, and sample vegan meals.

Become a member knowing your fees will benefit the work of the sanctuary, both in caring for the animals, and fighting for the institution of anti-cruelty laws for farm animals. For more information about the animals at the sanctuary, the campaigns currently underway, events, factory farming, and the rental of cabins at the sanctuaries call (607) 583-2225 or visit www.farmsanctuary.com.