

The Joys and Challenges of Rescuing Foxes Born in Captivity

A Special Interview With Mikayla Raines

By Dr. Karen Becker

Dr. Karen Becker:

Hi, I'm Dr. Karen Becker, and I'm so happy that Christa has nominated Mikayla [Raines] and Ethan [Raines] for a Game Changer award. This morning we have Mikayla with us, and we're so excited to learn more about the amazing work that she's doing. Congratulations on your Game Changer award, Mikayla, and thank you for joining me today.

Mikayla Raines:

Yes, thank you.

Dr. Karen Becker:

For people that don't know about your passion, how you got started, why don't you back up and tell our listeners, readers, and subscribers a little bit more about how you became so passionate and so involved with the work that you do?

Mikayla Raines:

I am a, primarily a fox rescuer, and my passion came from when I was younger, my mom used to do wildlife rehab and I would help her out doing wildlife rehab. I just absolutely fell in love with this gray fox that we rehabbed. That was it. That was it for me, I guess. That was a turning point and I knew I somehow wanted foxes in my life. I didn't actually know there was a demand for rescuing captive-bred, captive-born foxes. I'm glad I got here. This is not how I expected to land, but foxes are my passion and I'm glad I was able to follow my dream and get where I'm at.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Wow. Back up and walk us through the evolution. This is my 37th year as a federally licensed wildlife rehabilitator, so I totally understand the passion of recognizing that Mother Nature doesn't have people out there advocating for orphaned, injured, ill and sick wildlife. I totally get that. I get where your heart comes from, but then, and I also get the magic of foxes, magic. But then talk to me a little bit about the whole breeding in captivity, because that's a piece that probably a lot of people that maybe are just thinking about this for the first time, "Hmm, where does that come from?" It's a gross, dark backstory, but it's worth talking about in that foxes are being bred for other reasons.

Mikayla Raines:

Foxes being bred in captivity originally came from being bred in fur farms. Fur farms have been going on for a very long time. There's fur farms that we rescue from, and then there's also breeders that we rescue from, or people who buy foxes from breeders as a pet and then they're like, "Wow, this is a lot of work and it's destroying my house and it smells like a skunk." Then we end up taking them in. Those breeders though, these foxes have been bred in captivity for

over 50 generations. They have all these weird colors that don't even exist in the wild, and they all just, they all date back to fur farms-

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah.

Mikayla Raines:

-whether we get them directly from a fur farm or pet surrender situation.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Right now, would you say that – hopefully, at least from my perspective, fur farms are on the decline, and that people recognize that it's a disgusting, deplorable industry? That's a whole different topic. But I would assume, is the ratio of fur farm fox versus people who thought they'd make great pets and realize it's too much, is it 50/50, or would you say it's primarily people who think I'm going to get a fox as a pet and then realize, “Holy cats”?

Mikayla Raines:

Right now at our rescue, it is pretty much a 50/50. Half of them came from a fur farm, and the other half were pet surrender situations.

Dr. Karen Becker:

I have so many questions. First of all, once you get them, do they always stay with you, or do you place them with other people who are capable of caring for them? Because I would think that at some point, you would become completely overrun with rescue foxes.

Mikayla Raines:

Yes, like every rescue, we have a capacity. We work with other rescues. There's other fox rescues that we collaborate with and there's certain fox rescues that specialize in different things. We all work together whenever a fox gets surrendered to any of us, just to figure out what the best place is for it. Then we do, we're licensed to adopt foxes out, but of course we would never want to put a fox in the situation that got them here in the first place. If somebody were to want to adopt a fox from us, we have to train them in. They need a certain amount of training hours. They need knowledge and experience. There's a whole criteria that they have to follow to be able to legally and just knowledgeably adopt a fox.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Talk to me a little bit about the regulations, because it's a little bit like people who think bobcats are amazing, which they are, cheetahs, amazing, which they are, and then people want one. Can you walk us through, what are the legalities and does it vary state to state? Then, what's your – for people that say, "Oh my gosh, foxes are cool. They're smart and playful and adorable, I think I want one," can you go through the legalities, and then why you would or would not recommend them?

Mikayla Raines:

The legalities do vary state to state, and we always just tell people, “Check with your state, but then also check with your county.”

Dr. Karen Becker:

Okay.

Mikayla Raines:

In Minnesota, for example, where I live, you can have a pet fox in the state of Minnesota, but many counties will restrict it. Of course, apartments and usually any subdivision and suburbs and areas like that, don't allow pet foxes. That goes for a lot of states, too. They prefer them to be out in the country.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yes. And for someone that says foxes are adorable, which they are, and they're sweet and so playful and so smart, just really unique animals, a little bit like raccoons in that people see baby raccoons and they're like, "Oh my gosh, I want one." What's your advice as a seasoned fox-owning and fox-loving veteran? What's your advice?

Mikayla Raines:

You never want to compare them to a dog or cat. If you want a fox and your expectation is like, “Oh my gosh, they're kind of like a dog or kind of like a cat,” you're going to be very disappointed because they're not domesticated like dogs and cats are, and they're very destructive. My house, I have foxes that come in my house. They have outdoor yards, but I do allow some of them inside. And because of this, we have no carpet in the house. We have no furniture in the house. All of our beds are Murphy beds that fold into the wall, because they will dig through anything and they will pee on anything, and they smell really bad. They're really stinky animals. If you were to let a fox into your house, your whole house is going to smell bad forever.

That's just some of the things, I guess. I guess I tell people who are interested in adopting that they have to have think of it as more of like a farm animal. You want an outdoor enclosure for them and don't expect that you're going to be able to happily have a fox in the house, because most people can't handle that, just because it's a lot. They're jumping on the counters and they're peeing in your cups, and they're just doing all sorts of things.

Dr. Karen Becker:

All sorts of socially, but wild animal behaviors. They're social and so enjoyable to watch, but yet very much still have a lot of wild tendencies and that you need to be aware of. Can I ask, how many foxes do you care for? How many animals do you have in and around your home?

Mikayla Raines:

Usually at any given time, the rescue has about 50 animals on site. Then we also have staff and volunteers and stuff that come in and help.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Nice. Is there a big difference between the foxes coming in from being rescued from fur farms and the foxes that people thought would make great pets that realize, “Holy cats, my house is destroyed, I can't deal with this anymore”? The foxes coming from fur farms, I know that they were bred to be docile.

Mikayla Raines:

Yeah.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Is there a big notable personality difference between those two categories?

Mikayla Raines:

Yes. Yes and no. I guess I feel like it depends on the breeder. I don't always know what breeders these foxes are coming from, but I have noticed that the temperament in some of the pet surrender foxes are very - they're very, very social. They're not as maybe shy or skittish as some of the fur farm rescue foxes.

Even if we got a fur farm rescue fox as a pup and then we got a pet surrender fox as a pup, a lot of times the pet surrender ones are just more social. I think that's just because they've been bred so long, just specifically for those social tendencies rather than just fur quality.

There is a little bit of a difference, but sometimes we get pet surrenders. I guess the pet surrenders usually come in more damaged, emotionally or psychologically, than the fur farm rescue ones. People are always surprised about this, and it doesn't necessarily mean that the pet surrender once came from an abusive situation, but they came from a family and they were once loved and they got all this attention and everything, and then their world just gets flipped upside down and then they're just, “What they what's going on?” They freak out and it takes us a long time to adjust. Then the fur farm rescue ones, they're just grateful. They're like, oh wow. Suddenly we have all the space.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, I believe that. I have not kept up with fur industry. It just is a whole topic that literally makes my skin crawl. Are the number of fur farms declining in Canada and the U.S.?

Mikayla Raines:

Definitely. It's definitely dying.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Good. Good.

Mikayla Raines:

We're happy about that.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Would you say that the number of people breeding – I'm going to call, it's not an exotic, it's an indigenous animal. It's like raccoon breeders. People are breeding raccoons for pets and they have a USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture) license to do it. Are the number of those people trying to make fox into sociable pets, are they declining or not necessarily, you still are getting a lot?

Mikayla Raines:

I don't see them declining at all. If anything, that might be going up. I guess just the big thing is just us trying to educate people. I really wish breeders would just make sure to screen people and educate them. I just wish there were more breeders out there that actually cared and not just for a profit thing, because that's a big problem too.

Dr. Karen Becker:

It is a little bit like factory farming. The people on that are familiar with anything, understand puppy mills, but there really are fox mills. That's exactly what they are, and maybe not for their fur anymore, but there're people just breeding foxes for sale and they will sell to absolutely anyone. You're right, the educational piece is critical because they're not like a dog or a cat at all. I find it wonderful and amazing that you've taken on this niche rescue and niche passion, which is beautiful. What do you love most about the work that you do with this magical, and I think very misunderstood, species?

Mikayla Raines:

That's hard to say. There's so much I love about it and there's so much that's very hard about it, but I guess I love bottle-raising and I love bottle-raising the little babies. That's always just such a cool bonding experience for me. I guess because of the fact they're not releasable, some people are confused as why you can't release them into the wild, and it's because they were born in captivity and they don't know wild, and that just could never be a possibility for them. I guess I like the bonding experience of being able to bottle-raise them and socialize them. That just makes my heart happy.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, yeah. When we think about this really important work that you're doing, because you're in a tough spot. Most federally licensed wildlife rehabilitators, it's illegal to take an animal from the wild and keep it as a pet and most people know that. Wildlife rehabbers take those animals, like your mama did, fix them and then release them. That isn't a possibility for the foxes that you're working with. They were born in captivity, either for their fur or to be pets, and that didn't work out, and they can never go back to the wild because they don't know how to be a wild fox.

Mikayla Raines:

It's illegal actually. People don't realize that it's illegal to release captive born animals into the wild.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Their reason being is that those captive-born animals can hold diseases that will totally obliterate wild populations. Anyone watching this, if you have an indigenous species, even if it's a turtle that you got from the pet store, do not release it into the wild, because that's exactly how-

Mikayla Raines:

It doesn't help.

Dr. Karen Becker:

It doesn't help at all. Thank you for bringing it up. That's a really important point. You have a difficult job, because you have an animal that is not necessarily amazing in the house. People think that, "Oh my gosh, they're so cute, I'm going to get one, and then realize, oh my goodness, no." You have this growing population of animals that can never go back and be wild animals again.

They do have specialized care and that they need to be outside, and they need to be able to express their natural tendencies of moving their bodies and digging and foraging and interacting and playing, which takes space and time. Also respect that they're not a dog or a cat. They're neither, and they're not domestic or wild. They're somewhere in between.

You've got this really unique, important job as a fox rescuer. If you put that all together, and if you think about your mission or your passion, and trying to help the general public, who probably doesn't know a whole lot about fox information, fox behavior, if you could tell the world one thing about foxes or human interaction with foxes, if you could relay some thoughts about what you want people to know most, what would it be?

Mikayla Raines:

Oh my gosh, that's so hard.

Dr. Karen Becker:

It can be a bunch of thoughts. It doesn't have to be one.

Mikayla Raines:

I guess one important one that I guess doesn't necessarily have to do with my captive rescue foxes, but this is a question we have a lot, and it's about don't feed wild foxes because if you're getting them tame and used to you, that could actually put them at risk for being shot or being killed by people. Also, it messes up the ecosystem with them hunting and making sure that they're catching food and eating healthy and stuff like that. That's something that we often have to bring up to our followers. As cool as it would be to feed wild foxes, probably not best for them. That's something to think about.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. Maybe we look at animals in their natural environment, like, let's say people do have a fox that comes and visits their backyard and how beautiful they are and how entertaining, how just interesting they are to watch them interact, that they may not be amazing pets in the house,

maybe. Your entire property is filled with animals that people at one time thought would be a great pet, ended up not being a great pet.

Mikayla Raines:

Yeah, having a fox in the house, I guess to me is like having, I don't know, goats or chickens or horses in the house. They just don't belong indoors. They're just like other farm animals. They're just not meant to be in the house. Even though foxes aren't farm animals, but they require being outside. They require having space. That's just something that's super important.

When people want to adopt from us and they want to have the fox in the house, we're always like, "You can have the fox come in your house, but in order to adopt, you have to have an outdoor, suitable enclosure with dig guard and lean in, because they can dig out and they can climb straight up fences. There's just a lot that goes into even being able to contain a fox safely outside.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Such important work that you're doing, and really not a whole lot – it's wonderful that you have a network of other fox rescuers. It's wonderful because it's not a common thing. We're so thankful that it's your passion, and we're so thankful that you're doing it. These animals need advocacy and they need support and they need people to educate about their needs, and their importance in the environment as well. Foxes are, in my opinion, a very misunderstood species.

If people wanted to learn more about your rescue efforts, your educational efforts, what you're doing, or if they wanted to support you and follow you, where would they go to get more information, Mikayla?

Mikayla Raines:

SaveAFox.org is our website and Save A Fox Corporation is our Facebook page. We also have Instagram, which is @SaveAFox_Rescue.

Dr. Karen Becker:

I am so thankful that Christa nominated you and your organization.

Mikayla Raines:

Thank you, Christa.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Thank you, Christa. Thank you, Christa. It's wonderful, and I am so thankful that there are people like you who find a species that is kind of your soulmate, and just will do everything they can for the educational support and being able to help these animals that, really, are stuck in between not being able to be released and not being amazing house pets. They need help and support and you're providing that. We're so thankful for everything you're doing.

Mikayla Raines:

Well, thank you. I enjoy it.