

A Serendipitous Rescue That Led to Giving More Souls a Second Chance

A Special Interview With Mary Jo Rulffes

By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Dr. Karen Becker:

Hi, I am Dr. Karen Becker, and Nancy has nominated Mary Jo Rulffes for a Game Changer Award. And I'm so happy that Mary Jo is joining us now to tell us more about her passion and how she serendipitously fell in love with a breed that I believe has changed her life. Mary Jo, congratulations on your nomination and thanks for joining me.

Mary Jo Rulffes:

Thank you so much. I'm excited.

Dr. Karen Becker:

I'm excited, too. Nancy, the lovely woman who nominated you, gave me a little bit of a backstory about how you serendipitously fell in love with Australian Cattle Dogs, but for our listeners and viewers and readers that want to know more about that story, will you just walk us through how that happened?

Mary Jo Rulffes:

Absolutely. My husband and I were actually going on a shopping trip in Lancaster, Pennsylvania to meet our daughter to go Christmas shopping in 2013. On our second day of shopping, my husband looked down under a stairwell at the outdoor mall and saw this little red face looking out at him. It was a red Cattle Dog.

I looked down [and] realized she had a nest built down there, so she'd been living there. I went to get help from mall security and they told me, "Oh, she's been there a while." I'm like, "Why is nobody doing anything?" And they're like, "Because we were told if we called animal control one more time, they would take care of it not very nicely." And I was like, "Well, this is not happening."

I had my husband take me back to the hotel room. I reached out on Facebook and within 10 minutes I had 72 responses from people offering to help us there in Lancaster. And most of them were with the rescue group I'm with now, ACDRA (Australian Cattle Dog Rescue Association). We went that night to try to capture her, and she had been there so long that she wouldn't let us catch her. And a huge snowstorm was coming and we had to leave, which broke my heart. These very kind people set up a watch 24/7.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Wow.

Mary Jo Rulffes:

They did rotisserie chickens for her. They had grills set up. The mall was letting them run extension cords. And within two days they caught her. And I said, "We will come back and get her." So, that started my journey with Australian Cattle Dog Rescue [Association], because they were there to help me. They made me an immediate member so that I could help them, and it just escalated from there. I started joining more committees and here I am. It's due to Tanger that I'm part of this rescue, and now the president of this rescue.

Dr. Karen Becker:

I love that. Well, I have a bunch of burning questions, but first of all, were you able to place this beautiful dog? Did she find a forever home?

Mary Jo Rulffes:

She stayed with us.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Ah, okay. The best kind. Woo-hoo. That's beautiful.

Mary Jo Rulffes:

We did lose her about a year ago. She ended up with cancer. She was probably about 6 years old when we got her. But yeah, I couldn't let her go after we got her. It was just love at first sight.

Dr. Karen Becker:

That's awesome.

Mary Jo Rulffes:

And it was so much work to get her to come around and to be a normal dog that I couldn't let her go.

Dr. Karen Becker:

That's really such a beautiful story. And you know what's so heartwarming? The fact that you had 72 responses.

Mary Jo Rulffes:

Yes.

Dr. Karen Becker:

I mean, you can find compassionate, empathetic humans on every corner of the planet if you go looking. And you did. And it's so beautiful, the response you got from the community. Walk us through what your organization does and how it works. And are you aligning adoptive families or foster families? Walk us through how things work.

Mary Jo Rulffes:

We do it all, pretty much. Our rescue runs from Georgia to Maine. We have about 800 active members, and we have an additional probably 700 members who aren't quite as active. About 1,500 members. We have about 100 foster homes. We are 100% volunteer and 100% foster home-based.

All of our dogs that we pull, from a majority of them southern states, go into foster homes and live with families until we're comfortable that they're medically ready, behaviorally ready to move on to their homes. Then we have a website and a Facebook page where we list them for adoption. And our foster homes actually get to screen the applications and pick where their dogs are going.

They know their families, they meet their families, we know they're going to safe places, and we put them through a pretty good process to adopt. We do reference checks, vet checks, we do home visits, and a lot of phone calls back and forth, just getting to know the adopter a little bit to make sure we're comfortable with our dogs going to them.

Dr. Karen Becker:

What a beautiful system. Before I forget, if you [could] let people know, if people wanted to check out what dogs are available, or to become a foster family, or [to] make a donation, how would they reach you? Both website and social media?

Mary Jo Rulffes:

Our website is ACDRA.org, and there is a link on there to our adoption application, our foster home membership applications. We are always looking for new members in foster homes, [and] need them desperately. And then we are on Facebook as Australian Cattle Dog Rescue Association. We are also on Instagram as Australian Cattle Dog Rescue Association.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Beautiful. Okay. That's wonderful. You serendipitously found this baby, rescued her [and] started getting involved with the organization. Now you are running the organization, and I understand how that goes.

Mary Jo Rulffes:

It's a little bit scary sometimes. I mean, I never thought when I joined I would be in this role. I joined starting out on our applications team, and then I became a foster home. And my husband and I have fostered about 250 Cattle Dogs so far.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Wow. What a beautiful – That right there, my gosh. I mean, all the lives that you have saved, how totally fulfilling for you. That's awesome. This goes along with my next question. You have a lot of roles. You basically have probably done everything in the organization, but when you get up in the morning, what do you love most about your work with this rescue?

Mary Jo Rulffes:

I have to say it's the rescue family in the rescue. I mean, I've met so many amazing people that I didn't realize truly still existed. Because it's so hard sometimes to see the kindness and compassion and humility from people, but when you get into this kind of family, it's amazing what they will all do to save one of these dogs. I mean, I think the most favorite part of the rescue is the fostering of the dogs. But I have to say that the family and the people I have met. I mean, I have friends in southern states that work their butts off for me [but] I've never met. It's pretty amazing. And I think it was great for me to go back to realizing that there are still good people.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Literally. I think when you have the opportunity to meet and connect, and not even sometimes physically meet, but you've got people supporting the mission, all working together to save dogs. They're salt of the earth people, but also you do form a family as a rescue community, which then just makes the energy better and stronger knit. And rescue is a really hard compassion project, as you know. It's economically challenging, it's emotionally devastating. There's just a lot of valleys, but there are also so many mountaintops, especially when you're able to save so many animals. But doing that as a community is a really lovely thing. Are you the largest in the U.S.? Are you the largest rescue for Australian Cattle Dogs?

Mary Jo Rulffes:

I have to believe we are. I mean, I know that there are some pretty good-sized ones in Texas and whatnot, but I think we are the ones that cover the most states as an individual rescue. And we go as far west as Kentucky and Tennessee, simply because that's the limit of the resources we have as far as financial and membership right now. And with what we have now, it's hard to grow, especially in states further west.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, yeah, exactly.

Mary Jo Rulffes:

I think that's why. Yeah, I think we're probably one of the bigger ones.

Dr. Karen Becker:

That's amazing. Do you have people reaching out to you from other states? I would assume?

Mary Jo Rulffes:

Yes.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Probably from all over.

Mary Jo Rulffes:

Pretty much, because when they do a Google search and look for Cattle Dogs, we come up. And we do have a rehoming team as well that helps people in states we don't cover as far as foster homes and whatnot. We do help people as far as California rehome their dogs. They're listed on our website. They choose the home, we just help them a little bit.

Dr. Karen Becker:

That's a beautiful service too. You're keeping dogs out of shelters by doing that.

Mary Jo Rulffes:

Exactly.

Dr. Karen Becker:

That's really lovely. I know you said you fostered 250 dogs. If you could guesstimate how many Cattle Dogs have been through your program, any idea?

Mary Jo Rulffes:

Since the start or since I've been with them?

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. Well, that's a good question. Yeah.

Mary Jo Rulffes:

I actually also am our Georgia state rep. Even though I live in New York, I handle all the pulls from Georgia. I can tell you from Georgia alone, since 2019, we pulled about 850 dogs out of that state. Yeah.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Wow. That's a lot of souls that have a second chance. How beautiful. So beautiful. I bet when you first started, first of all, you did not picture yourself running a rescue certainly. But it also

changes your life and enriches your life in so many ways. If you could share one thing that you've learned with the world about the work that you're doing, or one fact you'd want them to know, or thus far in your journey of rescue, if you could tell the world one thing, what would it be?

Mary Jo Rulffes:

Just remember that everybody still needs kindness and compassion and humility. Especially those people that are sometimes having to give up their dogs. I see a lot of really negative posts sometimes on people who are trying to find a new home for their dog. And I don't think sometimes people take the time to look into the backstory and find out that sometimes it's not really their choice. I would just really encourage everybody to be more compassionate and kind, and understand that it's not always their choice.

And, obviously, education. I mean, educate, educate, educate. Especially in the southern states, they need help. And they just don't understand the importance of spay and neuter, and the importance of reaching out to a rescue that can help you find a really good home for your dog, not just giving it to anybody.

And I think those are my two biggest things. And don't be afraid to try something new and take that leap and challenge. And join a rescue. You don't have to be active all the time. Just ask them, "What can I do to help?" And don't be afraid to try.

Dr. Karen Becker:

I think those are beautiful suggestions and tips. I think one of the things people think, "You know what? If I volunteer, if I show interest, they're going to want to make me director." The beautiful thing about rescues is it could be, as you said, as simple as maybe doing something behind the scenes at home on your own computer. And it could be an hour a week, an hour a day, whatever.

We'll take whoever wants to help with a good heart. We'll take it. And so, I think that that's a good plea to remind people, is that you can fit the hours that you have to volunteer around the rescue schedule. And it helps dramatically to have a couple extra hands onboard on a daily basis, [it] makes a huge difference.

That's our plug to get out there and volunteer. If you currently don't have a platform, find a place to plug into that allows you to serve your community. And it sounds like you have an amazing network of volunteers that really becomes family to you.

Mary Jo Rulffes:

Yes. Yes, absolutely. I couldn't do any of this without them. I keep telling them, "I'm just a member with a title and a little more work."

Dr. Karen Becker:

It's true. It's true. Yeah. You're just volunteering more hours every week and you're moving all the buttons behind the scenes, but we're so appreciative. It's fantastic.

This is exactly why I started the Game Changers platform, was to highlight beautiful souls who oftentimes, they weren't necessarily planning on running or starting or participating, or starting a mission or platform or organization or running one, but you end up recognizing there's a need. And you're there in front of animals that need you, and you step up to the plate, and you have done that. And I'm so thankful that Nancy nominated you for a Game Changer award.

Mary Jo Rulfes:

[inaudible 00:12:41].

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, and I appreciate you taking time. What an awesome organization. And I appreciate you not only volunteering, but taking time to explain the good work that you're doing to us. Congratulations on your award.

Mary Jo Rulfes:

Thank you. All right.