

# A day in the life...

Fear for a pet's safety makes leaving an abusive relationship hard. That's why **Mary Wakeham** founded the charity **Refuge4Pets**

INTERVIEW **JANE YETTRAM**

## 🕒 6am

Before helping my kids get ready for school, I take the dogs for a walk.

It's a long time ago now, but I'm a survivor of domestic abuse. My dog at that time was petrified of the perpetrator, who'd torment her because he knew it upset me. Just before I fled, he strangled her – luckily not fatally. But I'll never forget that day.

After escaping, I trained in the field of domestic abuse (DA). On moving back to my native Cornwall, I became an independent domestic violence advocate, supporting victims at serious risk. But, because refuges can't take pets, I had no practical solutions for families escaping with animals. This stops many survivors leaving, so I vowed to do something about it. I got £10,000 from the National Lottery and, in August 2017, founded Refuge4Pets. Since then we've supported over 350 families to escape, and fostered more than 500 animals.

## 🕒 8.45am

With the kids off to school, I get started. We've just given up our office as we couldn't afford it. Now we work at home or on the road.

Kelly, our administrator, is the heart of our small team, taking calls to our helpline and referrals from across the UK (we're one of only four specialist services nationwide).

Referrals come from DA services, the police and so on, but most self-refer. Many

women call us first because they can't focus on their own escape until they've sorted their animal's safety. So we connect them with their local DA service and work together on getting them to safety.

Sometimes we have to act fast. Recently we were called by A&E. A repeat victim of DA had come in and she wanted to escape her abuser. He was in custody but could only be kept for a limited time. I rushed out and met her at her home. She packed up, I collected the dog and we left. We had just that small window of opportunity to get her to safety. She went to emergency accommodation and we took her dog to the foster carer.

## 🕒 11am

A Zoom call with other agencies about a woman at high risk, who won't leave because of her animals. Luckily, we can step in and help.

I spend lots of time on Zoom, but our three project workers are mainly on the road, driving across Devon and Cornwall, doing the animal-related work. Right now Vicki is settling a cat into foster care, Tami is taking a dog to the vet, and Lucy is dropping off supplies of food and flea treatment. They see all fostered animals monthly at least, to make sure they're doing well.

## 🕒 12.15pm

I check the details of a dog show we're attending this weekend to raise



Mary (centre) with Refuge4Pets project workers Vicki and Lucy

## “ Long term, we want to have a refuge where families can bring their animals

our profile. We're always out in the community, and people volunteer because we focus on both animals and DA.

We have 135 foster carers across Devon and Cornwall. We couldn't do this without them, and supporting them is crucial. Many are DA survivors and want to help others. Some have reached a stage in their life where they feel unable to have their own animals. Some are in poverty, but as we cover all costs, caring for a pet becomes possible.

## 🕒 1pm

I eat at my desk while planning a training session I'm delivering. We train many professionals, from vets to DA services,

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explaining the link between domestic abuse and animal abuse. This was the subject of my PhD, looking at animal abuse as a strategy of coercive control. My research has enabled us to do training and awareness-raising across the UK.

## 🕒 2.30pm

As the project workers are on the road, I go to the train station to collect a dog and take it to its foster home. We've been working on a plan to get this woman to safety, and this is a crucial step. We often meet people at train stations, motorway service stations, refuges – wherever is best for them.

Mostly, we foster dogs and cats, but I once collected 11 ducks, transporting them in the back of my old estate car!

Owners can't see their animals while they're in foster care – we place animals away from the perpetrator's location and away from the family. This keeps volunteers and animals safe. Instead, we provide lots of updates and pictures,

which is important as people can struggle with separation.

## 🕒 4.30pm

Shirley, our outreach coordinator, calls with an update on resettling a family newly out of refuge. Resettlement work is important. When someone leaves a refuge they can become isolated. They're in a new community, often coping with post-traumatic stress. So Shirley works with them on both practical things and trauma recovery.

## 🕒 5pm

Time to help the kids with homework. Although my job is stressful, it's flexible. Working around my children is really important.

I walk the dogs again. I have five – all through Refuge4Pets. They are animals that couldn't return to their owners.

We hope to reunite pets and owners within six months. Reuniting animals is

the best part of the project workers' job! At the moment, though, it's longer because of the difficulties survivors have finding accommodation.

## 🕒 6pm

Macaroni cheese for tea – it's a firm favourite! We all eat together. Family time is so important.

## 🕒 8pm

I catch up on funding bids. Along with Anne-Marie, our marketing and communications coordinator, I focus on bringing in money, but it's an uphill battle. The National Lottery is our biggest funder but only covers part of the core elements of our service. Other animal welfare organisations get funding from legacies, corporate partners and philanthropists. We're trying to break into those areas as well as boosting public donations.

We won some awards last year, but it's bittersweet because our future is in the balance from lack of cash. We remain optimistic, though. If we get through this tough period, we have ambitious plans. We'd like our own premises for housing dogs and cats too traumatised for foster care; private boarding would bring in income too. And, long term, we want to have a refuge where families can bring their animals.

## 🕒 10.30pm

Bedtime, though I keep my phone on. Though most referrals come during the day, I stay on call to support foster carers in case an animal gets poorly.

It tends to be me on call, but we all muck in. Everyone's so committed because this is far more than just a job.

### How you can help...

- Make a donation.
- Fundraise.
- Invite a speaker to your Guild.
- Volunteer as a foster carer or in another role.

To find out more, visit [www.refuge4pets.org.uk](http://www.refuge4pets.org.uk) or call 0300 4000 121.