

Benjamin and Friends

~ Winter 2025 ~

Included in this issue ...

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- Don't Like Winter? Get A Dog!
- Horses as Healers — what does the research tell us?

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Email lisa@onethousandtrees.com
for more information or to submit your article.

Mailing Address:

Benjamin and Friends
c/o One Thousand Trees
3-304 Stone Road West, Suite 338
Guelph, Ontario N1G 4W4

the
Benjamin
Project



**ONE
THOUSAND
TREES**



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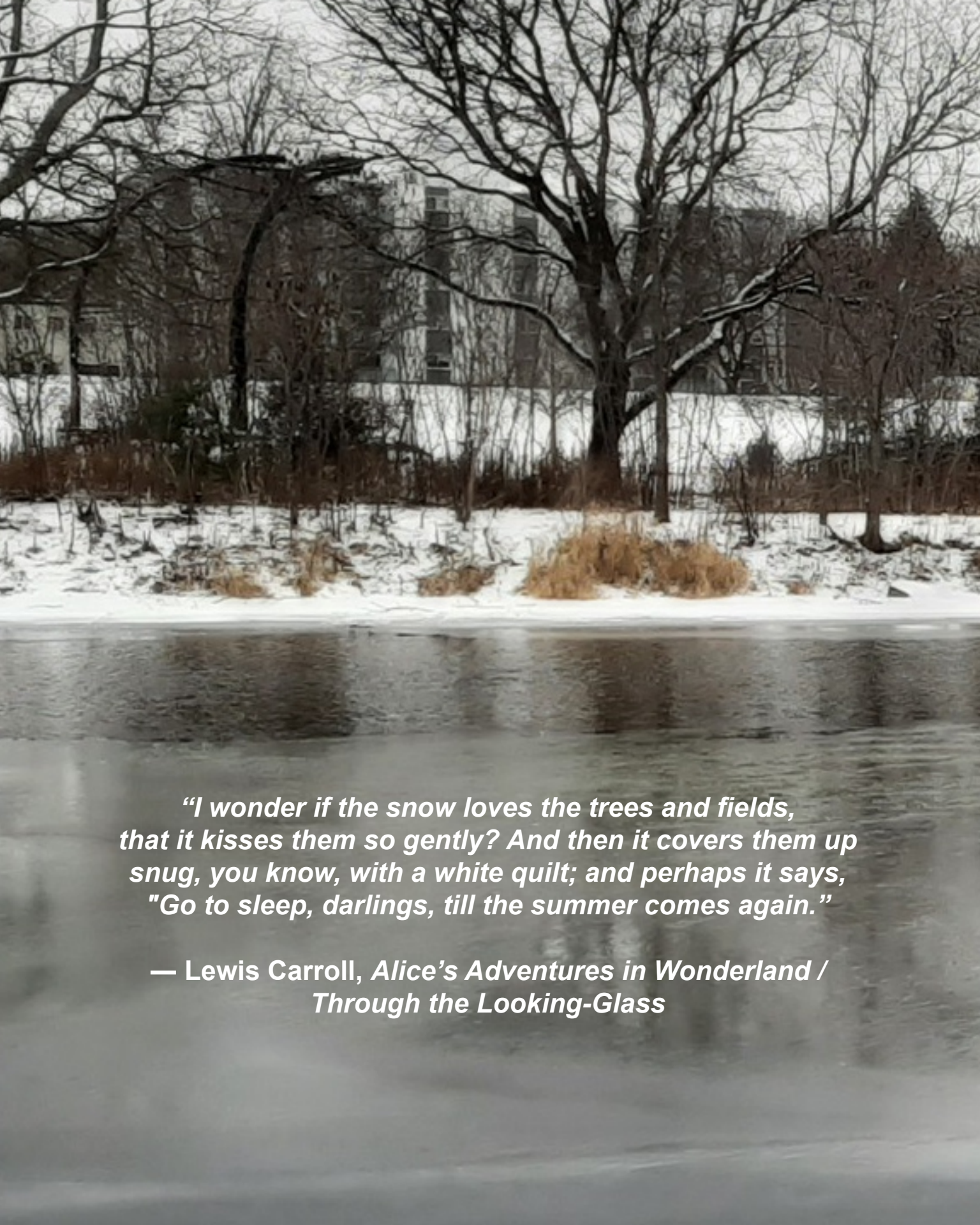
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On Our Cover:

Ashley, the beloved canine companion of our publisher, Lisa Browning, and the focus of *Losing One Angel, Adopting Another* (page 19).

A photograph of a winter landscape. In the foreground, there is a body of water, possibly a pond or a slow-moving stream, with a thin layer of ice. The middle ground is covered in a layer of snow, with several bare trees and some dry, brown grasses. In the background, there are more trees and a building with a grid-like facade, possibly a school or a public building. The sky is overcast and grey.

*“I wonder if the snow loves the trees and fields,
that it kisses them so gently? And then it covers them up
snug, you know, with a white quilt; and perhaps it says,
“Go to sleep, darlings, till the summer comes again.”*

*— Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland /
Through the Looking-Glass**

Don't Like the Winter? Get A Dog!

By Donna Kaye

*When we walk, we naturally go to the fields and woods:
what would become of us, if we walked only in a garden or a mall?*

~ Henry David Thoreau

For some people, it's not easy being outside every day, especially in winter.

This realization was top of mind at a recent 'girls lunch', when our conversation about the freezing temperatures heated up. "There's just no way I'm going out when it's negative double digits!" "It's so drab and yucky out!"

Now that stung!

I'll admit, I'm a bit of a fanatic when it comes to walking, and the cold weather or winter season is not a deterrent. A minor challenge perhaps, but not a game-changer. I'm a fan of walking—and roaming, sauntering, wandering and strolling—especially in nature. My body, mind, and spirit crave it. Admittedly, my over-tasked busy brain needs the restful magical powers of the outdoors for a cognitive and emotional reboot. That feeling of being 'away' from overstimulation and demands, not to mention the excessive bandwidth that talking takes up, well you get the idea. In nature, we tend to feel more relaxed more quickly and generally we feel happier. So I turn off my phone and tuck it deep into my pocket (only to come out occasionally to snap a photo of the gifts I encounter), and head out.

But back to my friends. "Get a dog!" I casually proffered. Too funny how all the dog owners nodded in agreement. "Yup, that will do it." I heard someone say.

Of course this got me to reflect on my own beloved dog Jasper. He's no longer with us after a long run of 16 years, but he was a great walking motivator. He loved the outdoors as much as I do! I recall how he would quietly stare in anticipation of me mentioning going for a w-a-l-k. Yes, I had to spell it unless I was willing to go that minute!

Over the holidays I was dog-sitting for my sister's dog Brandy. For two weeks I was tasked with a strict schedule of care that included several daily walks. Brandy—a happy, yappy little ball of nervous energy—turned out to be a wonderful walking buddy. Outdoors we were so similar in our walking behaviour, it was hard to say who was having more fun. We certainly had a lot in common.



We all could take a lesson from our dogs. You know, look at the world from their perspective.

Thinking back to those walks, I remember that in the first five minutes, we started out strong, eager and energetic, happy to be off the couch and out in the fresh crisp air. Feeling invigorated, and refreshed, we motored along quickly, shivering to stay warm. Discomfort is only temporary. Before long, our senses were fully engaged and we began to walk more mindfully. Our long strides on a linear path shifted to a zig-zagging pattern of shorter steps as our mutual curiosity took hold. Brandy and I would see things that bring delight, and breathe deeply things that smell. Attention is everything! Without it we don't see, hear, smell, touch or taste. It's so different outside. We both had the impulse to explore, sharing an unstoppable urge to take pauses, lean in and investigate. I'll be honest. Our pauses weren't always in sync, so I was reminded of the need to be patient and respectful when walking with a dog.

Without a doubt, a dog helps us remember that the outdoors is where we're meant to be. Our brains respond powerfully and innately to natural stimuli, if we allow it. The outside world is full of interesting things, but not an overwhelming number of interesting things at once. It's more



subtle, like a soft fascination. Dogs are good at being present, focused and attentive. They are pulled in when they encounter something interesting. When we are in nature, fully engaged, it leads to mindfulness.

Although Brandy didn't express it verbally, I can only assume she was feeling the same positive emotions of joy, contentment and amusement that I was feeling. Our shared experiences of active exploration altered us,

even if only temporarily. As we moved from domesticated spaces to wild spaces (even just the edge of a forest), our joy escalated, as did our impulse to be more adventurous. Drab? Yucky? I hardly think so. Flooded with smells of decaying leaves and the scent of pine trees, we were lured deeper into the woods. The forest floor was littered with nature's gifts, ready for close investigation. I could feel my stress diminishing, my heart rate slowing and my body

and brain relaxing. And hey, I'm not a dog. I wasn't digging through the snow and mosses into the soil, or sniffing some pine cones or scat. Yet, I know that the more time spent in nature, the more significant the increases in all measures of our health and wellbeing. And so we walked a little further.

"Get a dog," I said to my skeptical friends, lacking motivation to head outdoors in winter. Dogs need—and deserve—regular and repeated walks in nature over an extended period of time. So do we. This is how we build healthy habits, and confidence being outside in all kinds of weather. Be kind to yourself. If it takes longer to fall in love with winter, so be it. Start with early morning walks to help regulate your circadian rhythm, calm the mind and boost serotonin. Keep moving on the coldest days to

stay warm, but pause often for the best experience. Proper clothing is essential. Your walking companion may need a coat, but you definitely need layers to embrace winter.

Sadly, Brandy has returned home, but I just came back from a visit with another sister and we enjoyed several walking excursions with her two dogs. Huxley and Roscoe are dear to me, as they are the adorable main characters in our children's book, *Move Along Huxley and Roscoe!* Our love of nature, curiosity, and desire to learn through adventurous exploration is incorporated into the story. We know that all children learn from exploration, so we're hoping that the children who read our book will be inspired and able to relate to our characters. A second book titled *Slow Down Huxley and Roscoe!* is in the works.

Brrr, it's cold outside. Yes, it definitely is! My advice is to borrow a dog and go for a walk. You'll feel better about winter, for sure!



Move Along Huxley and Roscoe! is available from the One Thousand Trees bookstore at www.onethousandtrees.com.

We Love Our Woolies!

By Lisa Boonstoppel-Pot

*Originally published in The Rural Voice (www.ruralvoice.ca)
and reprinted with permission.*

Still farming and raising dairy sheep in their retirement, Eric and Elisabeth Bzikot of Conn have now written a book about sheep dairying for the next generation of those who “love their woollies.”

Called *A Practical Guide to Sheep Dairying*, the 95-page self-published book was designed “for first-time, prospective producers without pockets bulging with dollars,” says Eric, whom I met in the laneway hooking up a trailer in the cold of winter. This is a man who has worked hard his entire life and is still at it, though the pair did give up actually milking sheep some years ago. Now, they raise about 75 sheep in a former horse barn turned sheep barn.

The pair is also active in Bestbaa Dairy Ltd., in Fergus, a business they started to market sheep milk products which is now owned and operated by their son, Peter Bzikot.

“We started thinking about writing a book after we stopped milking,” says Elisabeth from the warmth of their farmhouse kitchen. “Then it took two winters to write, review and change.”

The book includes information on what you need to get started, sheep breeds, feeding and management, lambing, weaning, milking and common diseases and ailments.

“Having received little advice when we first began milking and having learned most of our lessons

through hard experience, we are writing this book to give practical advice to sheep dairy farmers to help them avoid problems in this field of farming,” reads the introduction.

Indeed, the pair had a circuitous and trial-ridden journey through sheep farming, along with joys and successes. A foray into their past reveals the pair were brought up in England, before moving to Manitoba in 1984 where they raised beef cattle and grew grains for 14 years. They struggled through low farm prices, relying heavily on Elisabeth’s income as a teacher. In 1998, they decided to try their luck in Ontario, moving to Conn to become dairy sheep farmers with a sideline of wild boar. The farm they bought had been a horse farm so they converted the horse stalls to sheep pens and so it began.

The wild boar business did not thrive but of the 64 imported British Milk Sheep embryos they implanted into Columbia sheep, there were 27 live births. Of those, seven were females. These became the nucleus of their herd which grew to 250 ewes at the peak of their milking flock.

From the start, Eric and Elizabeth were active in the industry and in marketing. They helped host the North American Dairy Sheep Symposium three times and Elisabeth was a popular speaker in the sheep industry.

On the farm, they milked for nine years in total but discovered early on that the market for sheep milk dissipated. That led to formation of a dairy

cooperative with a handful of other dairy sheep producers called Ewenity Dairy Cooperative. When it dissolved, they established BestBaa Dairy in 2003, a name shorted from their original farm name: Best Boar and Baa Farm.

The idea was to create sheep milk products to use their own milk and that of other producers to make more money selling value-added products. Sheep milk is known for its creamy texture and it also freezes well because of its high-solids contents. This allows dairy sheep producers to produce milk over the summer, store it, then create products over the fall and winter seasons.

Best Baa made cheeses, including cream cheese, feta, a gouda called 'Eweda', a camembert called 'ramembert and two raw milk firm cheeses labeled 'Ewe de cru' and 'Mouton rouge'.

Eric and Elisabeth were busy not only caring for sheep, milking sheep and shipping milk to the dairy, but also staying on top of quality control, labelling and marketing. They traveled to farmers' markets, hosted taste-testing events in grocery stores and were able to get their products in local grocery stores as well as Whole Foods and the The Big Carrot health food store.



It was a busy time. When stores decided to go through a distributor, it eased their workload but the Bzikots say it was actually a negative for their business. "We lost the relationship with the buyers and our product sales dropped by a third without the personal contact," remembers Eric.

Best Baa, however, went on to be a success, providing a living for their son Peter. Eric and Elisabeth are regular helpers delivering milk from other producers. No longer milking themselves (Eric forced the sale of the milking parlour so Elisabeth couldn't milk again!), they still raise British Milk Sheep, selling breeding stock and lambs to market.

"It's worked okay for us," says Eric. "We were able to make a

living but it wasn't at the level of financing a \$1,000,000 new barn!" Elisabeth said "milking sheep is not a money spinner – you get paid for your labour. But one of the advantages is that children can help and not get hurt."

Both, at different points in their conversation, Eric and Elisabeth would say "we love our woollies." It's clear milking and raising sheep has been a valued portion of their life. Eric had always been a farmer – he used to pull the sheep "out of the brambles" when he was a boy in England. When they moved to Ontario, Elisabeth decided to farm alongside him full-time. Together, they learned what it takes to raise dairy sheep, which "is as different from that of meat sheep as beef cattle is from cow dairying."

Dairy sheep are considered dual-purpose animals. They tend to be finer and larger than meat sheep, typically cycling between August and February, and can lamb between January and June. “The highest lactation yield is obtained if you lamb your ewes in January/early February, they can then milk into October milking 250 to 300 days,” states Chapter 4 on lambing.

There is much to be learned from their guide, in addition to speaking to the pair. Humble and articulate, the pair are genuinely flummoxed that I was amazed at their fortitude. Most couples their age are keen to retire to a smaller house in town but the pair are not convinced. They like being home, taking care of their sheep, gardening and writing! “I’d rather do stuff than sit down and get fat,” declares Eric. As Elisabeth sees it, there isn’t a better alternative and they hope one of their three children will consider taking over the farm one day. Maybe not to milk sheep, but to hang on to their rural heritage.

In the meantime, it’s business as usual for the Bzikots with morning and evening chores, and sharing their wisdom by word and paper.

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO SHEEP DAIRYING



Eric and Elisabeth Bzikot

Copies of A Practical Guide to Sheep Dairying can be found at the North Huron Publishing bookstore on Queen Street in Blyth, or online at the One Thousand Trees bookstore at www.onethousandtrees.com.



The Benjamin Project — 11 Years In

By Malcolm Bernstein

What have we done so far?

Benjamin was our family's dog for 13 wonderful years. We adopted him from the OSPCA and had a bond of love and affection that is hard to describe but one I know you understand. We lost Benjamin in 2013 and wanted to do something to remember him and honour his life, so we started [The Benjamin Project](#) in 2014.

[The Benjamin Project's](#) mission is two-fold: To educate children about responsible pet ownership and animal stewardship; and to raise funds for shelters, sanctuaries, and rescues. I wrote two books about Benjamin; the first was published in 2014, and a children's book published by Saplings, a branch of *One Thousand Trees Publishing*, in 2018.

Benjamin
A loving story about a dog
and his lasting impact on the animal kingdom



Written by Malcolm N. Bernstein
Illustrated by Shannon Tracey-Bogges

All the proceeds from these books and from sales of our annual calendar are donated. Lisa Browning, editor of this magazine, is the owner and publisher of *One Thousand Trees* and is someone I am very indebted to for her incredible dedication to [The Benjamin Project](#) and her tireless pro-bono work on its behalf.

Since starting, we have raised and donated some \$35,000 and more recently, have broadened our donations to include people shelters. So many people find themselves in situations whereby they and their pet are in supportive housing, or worse, they may need to surrender their pet under difficult circumstances. Anything we can do to help them, through donations to a human shelter or to an animal shelter that might be able to foster their pet as long as required, is something we are pleased to do.

Also, since our beginning, I have presented Benjamin's story and learnings about animal sentience to several thousand kids in schools, humane society

kid's camps, the CNIB kid's camp; and to hundreds of adults in libraries, church basements, animal sanctuaries, and seniors' residences. The kids often hold fundraisers for [The Benjamin Project](#) ahead of my presentation, adults buy books, and the proceeds are donated to shelters of their choosing. Everyone receives a *Benjamin Booster* certificate. Importantly, kids of all ages love the story and find joy in listening and sharing stories about their own pets.

Last year, with Lisa's vision and leadership, we initiated a program of kids writing stories about their pets, or animals in general, which Lisa publishes in a book for their school, which is then sold as a fundraiser for a local shelter. Five books were published in 2024, and our goal is to take this new program across the province and the country! See the next article for more info!

We also hosted the first-ever World Animal Day event, and are looking forward to doing a series of monthly events this year, leading up to a World Animal Day vendors market in October.

We are proud to offer a scholarship program whereby a child submits an application describing what their pet means or meant to them; their parents commit to setting aside the value of the scholarship for their child's post-secondary studies, ideally in a field related to animal welfare; and the child gets to take a tour of a local shelter with a scholarship award ceremony as part of the experience. To date, we have awarded two scholarships in partnership with Burlington Humane Society and its great Executive Director, Doug Shirton.

As we go forward, we look to continue to build on our achievements of the past 11 years, and to honour our precious little boy's life through our work. Your support is vital to fulfilling our mission, for which we are very grateful.



For the Love of Animals — A Collaborative Project with Elementary Schools By Lisa Browning

As Malcolm mentioned in the previous article, we started this collaborative project in 2024, and were honoured to collaborate with five elementary schools – located in Tyendinaga, Toronto, Guelph, Peterborough, and Georgian Bay. The first four books benefitted the humane societies in those cities, whereas the Georgian Bay book benefitted ElderDog Canada.

Although the project is continuing in 2025, we've made one minor change. Because we'd like this to be an educational experience for the participating students, we've added a research component. Rather than simply writing a "Why I Like Snakes" or "Why I Love My Cat" story, each class can do one of two things:

1. Choose a specific animal to research, then write about what they learn.
2. Choose a specific humane society, shelter or rescue to visit, and write about that experience. (Note: each class will have to choose the same organization, and parents will

have to agree to take their child there after school hours, unless a class trip can be arranged.)



Each story should be 300 words or less, and accompanied by a line drawing. (This because the books will continue to be published as informative colouring books.) Students will be able to purchase books at cost, and a complimentary copy will be provided for the school library.

We're excited about continuing this project, and are looking for interested teachers who'd like to participate. Email me at lisa@onethousandtrees.com for more information.



My Story, My Hero — River, the PTSD Service Dog By Brian Brown

I was a happy kid who enjoyed exploring the outdoors, playing sports, and hanging out with friends. Like other kids I went to school, I had my favourite classes and some classes I didn't enjoy. Growing up like many other kids in my community I took swimming lessons. This was the first time that I noticed that sometimes I would get very nervous.

Eventually after lots of help not only did I learn to swim, but I also discovered that I loved to do so. I even became a lifeguard and swimming instructor. In fact, I became a very good swim instructor, especially to those kids who were afraid of the water.



I didn't know at the time just how important learning how to overcome this fear would be. I learned that I really enjoyed helping others learn new things. I worked and volunteered for many years in my community. Not only did I grow up, but I learned to work with people of all ages and abilities. Helping people made me happy, and my family and friends watched as I went from a shy young boy to becoming more confident and outgoing.

When I got older, I began working, and moved away for my work. This was a new challenge for me, but I loved my work and discovered that change was not so bad. I learned to enjoy being in a new place and meeting new people.

My career as a first responder was rewarding, although sometimes I saw and heard very sad and tragic things. Usually, those things didn't seem to bother me. I was the person who wanted to help other people who were sad or upset.

But after seeing so many terrible things, I started to have dreams about them. Sometimes I couldn't sleep or concentrate because I kept remembering it all. I noticed that I didn't feel the same as I used to. Things that never used to bother me now did. I would get angry easily; I was anxious and I forgot things. I didn't think I was sad, but I didn't smile like I used to.

I wanted to know if this was normal, so I went to my doctor. I told him I didn't feel right, that there was something wrong, but I didn't know what it was. He asked me if I was sleeping well, and I told him I was not. "Are you eating well?" he asked. Again the answer was no. I told my doctor that I couldn't concentrate like before, and I would get frustrated quickly about things that I didn't normally get upset about. I told him I didn't know how to be happy, and I told him about the dreams.

I was diagnosed with PTSD, and given a referral to a psychologist. My first appointment was the following day. Although I was reluctant to share my feelings with a stranger, she made me feel safe.

Because of my condition I was no longer doing things with friends and family because I was so nervous and anxious, but there was one thing that always made me feel happy and safe — my neighbour's dog. I would spend hours in the driveway with him. It was the only time that I felt safe and normal.

When I told my psychologist about how the dog made me feel, she asked if I had heard of PTSD service dogs, who are trained as medical aids to help people with physical or mental conditions. These dogs are specially trained to sense when someone is feeling upset, and will do things to help them calm down. I knew then and there that this was something that could help me.

One of the most amazing days was when I went to meet my service dog for the first time. It was a bright sunny day, and I was so nervous and anxious to meet the trainer and owner for the first time. Then it happened there was a beautiful poodle named River.



Brian and River

I spent day and night working with the trainer to teach me and River how to become a team. It was very important that River would have special tasks to help me with my condition. She would wake me

when I was having bad dreams, she would let me know if someone was behind me too close, and if I was scared or anxious, even when I didn't know she would take me to a safe place. Even when I was at the mall, she would take me back to the door I came in and right to my car. This was great because sometimes I would forget what door I came in and where I parked.

Before long River and I were certified as a team, and we were best friends. Because she was a medical service dog to help me with my medical condition, she came everywhere I went. I was finally able to go get groceries, go to a movie, spend time with friends. River even came to the gym with me, and she learned to walk on the treadmill by herself. She was amazing!

Eventually I began to feel safer, and more like the old me but better. River allowed me to get back to living life again. I was finally starting to make some progress. I could laugh again; I was smiling, and I even began to volunteer once again.

Wanting to give back, I began to help other people who had PTSD, and started training dogs to be tested to become service dogs. My hope was that other people would learn to feel better and have confidence to do things again, just as I had.

After a few years of working with dogs and people who struggled like me, and seeing how much it changed people's lives, I wanted to do even more. It was then that I met Napoleon Dynamite, a mini-golden doodle. I was going to get to raise my first puppy. On an amazing day in the fall of 2021 I brought Napoleon Dynamite home.

River was much older but a great teacher, and she helped train Napoleon Dynamite to become an awesome service dog who would eventually grow up to help others just like River did for me.



*Top: Napoleon Dynamite coming home at 9 weeks
Bottom Left: Napoleon Dynamite & River
Bottom Right: River & Napoleon Dynamite*



I continue to work with folks who struggle to manage their PTSD and help them to better manage and train their dogs to assist them. I continue to work on managing my mental health but have

improved so much that I have returned to the work world in a brand-new role that I love; in the Office of the Fire Marshal where I provide Peer support to firefighters and families. This role allows me to continue to work with those who struggle but at the same time provide an example of how one can overcome.

While I may no longer have my PTSD service dog, I have a new K9 partner named Maureen who is an accelerant detection canine. Together as a team we assist our investigators in finding samples at fire scenes where the fire may be suspicious in nature.



Maureen

While I would not wish PTSD on anyone it has changed my life and I have had many opportunities that I would not have had otherwise. I continue to be grateful for what I have and will continue to work to assist others on their journey.

My Story, My Hero
River, My PTSD Service Dog



Brian Brown

Brian's story, geared toward young adults, is now available from the One Thousand Trees bookstore at www.onethousandtrees.com.

All proceeds from sales go toward the peer support network of the New Brunswick Association of Fire Chiefs.

Benjamin and Friends — The Kids' Edition

By Katherine Weir

It was in January 2024 that I first volunteered to be the project coordinator for the *For the Love of Animals* book, in collaboration with a Guelph elementary school. From start to finish, I was grateful to have been able to combine two of my passions: children and animals. Add to that a book as a by-product, and I was one happy woman!

Knowing some of the students at the collaborating school, I stayed in contact, and continued to talk about animals, and The Benjamin Project.

And, as usually happens when we follow our passion, one thing led to another, and a new project was born. Although one issue of *Benjamin and Friends* magazine had already been published, it contained some content geared at children, and

some geared at adults. The kids I connected with weren't happy.

I asked them to act as magazine critics, and let me know what they liked, and what they didn't. Here is what they noted:

- More pictures, less text.
- They love puzzles, activities, and colouring pages.
- They like information about animals but want it in chunks, in text boxes, and in ways they can interact with the information.
- More diversity in intellectual accessibility needs to occur.
- Finally, the thing they loved the most was the Growing Up Loved! submission because these monthly stories are told

by real pets. Their first-person animal-voiced stories that relate to the same experiences as children have.

They don't really want to hear much from adults. They want to hear first-hand from animals.

Luckily, all of this is doable. And because I have a unique ability to write first-person animal voices, and I am an educator, grandparent, and published author, I am now in my element!

The kids' edition of Benjamin and Friends will be published monthly, starting in February 2025.



Do you have a story to tell?

If you'd like to contribute content, or would like further information, please email Katherine at katherineaweir@gmail.com.

Horses as Healers

By Dr. Kristina Karvinen

Note: this article was originally published in The Transformative Power of Horses, available from the One Thousand Trees online bookstore.

The role of the domestication of the horse in defining human history is undisputedly an important one. As early as 6,000 years ago, humans started riding horses, altering the course of history concerning mobility, warfare, trade, disease dispersion, agriculture, and biological exchange (Taylor & Barron-Ortiz, 2021). Over the past century, however, horses have been largely replaced by cars, tractors, and other machinery. As a result, the usefulness of horses was predicted to fade into history as more powerful, faster, and practical means for achieving our needs were produced. Rather than being phased out, however, horses took a new role in the lives of humans as their duties shifted into primarily recreation. As horses began to be viewed in a different light, humans also started to recognize the potential physical and psychological benefits of horseback riding and other interactions with horses (Debose, 2015).

Throughout history there have been sporadic accounts of the potential therapeutic benefits of horses, dating back to the ancient Greeks. Hippocrates wrote of “riding’s healing rhythm” in his book *Natural Exercise*, presumably due to the rhythmic and repetitive movement of the horse, which is like the movement of human walking (Koca & Ataseven, 2015; Lessick, Shinaver, Post, Rivera, & Lemon, 2004). Since that time, medical reports from Europe over the last six centuries have detailed the physical and psychological benefits of riding horses and being in their company (Berg & Causey, 2014).

In more recent times, horses have been used for a wide range of therapeutic purposes. According to a recent content analysis, 26 medical uses of horses have been identified, including therapeutic riding, hippotherapy, equine assisted therapies, service, and recreational riding (White-Lewis, 2019). Experimental research examining the therapeutic effectiveness of horses have indicated several physical, psychological, and practical benefits of interactions involving horses in a wide variety of populations (White-Lewis, 2019).

Therapeutic Riding and Hippotherapy: Therapeutic riding involves horseback riding, aided by a therapeutic team, as a means of achieving physical, cognitive, social, and emotional well-being in people who have physical limitations. Hippotherapy also incorporates ridden work, but specifically includes the involvement of physiotherapists, occupational therapists, and/or



speech language pathologists, and is focused more on different movements of the horse as a means of achieving orthopaedic and neurological outcomes. Patient populations can include both adults and children with physical conditions such as scoliosis, hypermobility syndrome, stroke, and gross motor dysfunction. In the person with a physical limitation, riding can provide a sensorimotor experience so that the individual can develop, rehabilitate, and enhance physical skills (Lessick et al., 2004).

The modern history of riding as therapy has its roots primarily in the 1960s, when clinicians began to take note of the value of horseback riding for its therapeutic potential (Debose, 2015). In the late 1960s, the Canadian Association for Riding for the Disabled (CARD) was formed as the first to organization in North America to use riding as therapy for the disabled. At that time the benefits that were observed included improved posture, muscle stimulation, and increased coordination in individuals with cerebral palsy, poliomyelitis, arthritis, stroke, multiple sclerosis, and blindness (Woods, 1979).

Since that time several research studies have examined the effectiveness of therapeutic riding and hippotherapy and

have generally shown a beneficial effect on balance and gross motor function in people with neuromotor, developmental, and physical disabilities (Stergiou, Tzoufi, Ntzani, Varvarousis, Beris, & Ploumis, 2017). A potential mechanism of action was documented by Uchiyama, Ohtani, & Ohta (2011) in a three-dimensional analysis of the horse's movements while walking, compared to human walking. In laboratory experiments examining acceleration patterns of walking in horses and humans, results concluded that horseback riding offers motor and sensory inputs to the rider that are highly like that provided by human walking. As a result, people who have difficulty walking may experience tremendous benefit from horseback riding given the mounting evidence that walking stimulates brain activity, such as attention, organization of goal directed movements, and selective information processing (Uchiyama et al., 2011). Further, the swinging rhythm of riding a horse can have a positive effect on balance, mobility, and posture, potentially shortening recovery times and reducing symptoms (Koca & Ataseven, 2015). Perhaps most importantly, however, is that therapeutic horseback riding tends to make patients feel better, by indicating improvements in not just physical systems, such as muscular,

skeletal, vestibular, and cognitive, but also in psychological, social, educational, and behavioural outcomes (Granados & Agis, 2011).

Equine-Assisted Therapies: Equine-assisted therapies have been used as an umbrella term for therapy that utilizes horses as a part of mental health treatment and support. While people have perhaps realized the mental health benefits of horses for millennia, it is only recently that specific approaches have been developed that target mental health outcomes. These approaches include equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP), equine-assisted learning (EAL), equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP), and equine-facilitated learning (EFL). The primary differences between these approaches are that EAP and EEP focus on mental health treatment, while EAL and EFL address learning goals, such as leadership and life skills (Lee, Dakin, & McLure, 2016).

A large part of equine assisted therapies is the horse-human bond that is formed and becomes the basis for healing and learning. In all types of psychotherapy that humans engage in, one of the most important treatment factors is the strength of the therapeutic bond between client and therapist (Jennissen, Huber,

Nikendei, Schauenburg, & Dinger, 2022). Equally, in equine assisted therapies, the stronger the bond between the horse and the human, the greater the expected outcomes for the client (Palomar-Ciria & Bello, 2023). Forming a bond with a horse seems innately therapeutic, as connecting with companion animals of all types has been seen as healing for as long as humans have had a domesticated relationship with them (Ernst, 2014). Part of this is the universal human desire for secure connections, and animals have long provided this. Horses, and other animals, are non-judgmental and honest in their relationships with humans, which is likely part of the appeal in forming bonds with them. Further, a long history of the intertwining of humans and domesticated animals reveals a multitude of mutually beneficial exchanges, such as the provision of food, shelter, and care, in exchange for protection, help with human oriented goals such as hunting and farm work, and affection.

In recent decades, horses have become increasingly recognized for their potential for psychotherapeutic work. Being prey animals, horses are hyper aware of their surroundings, including being attuned to even small changes in their companions that may indicate the presence of danger. Horses

tend to interact with humans like they do with other horses, being highly aware of our emotions, attitudes, body language, and boundaries. As a result, horses can act as big, living, breathing biofeedback machines, giving immediate feedback to the individual on their own dynamic emotional states. Further, as prey animals, horses rely on each other for safety and maintain a close and collective social dynamic. Generally, horses extend this desire to connect to their human handlers and consider us to be a part of the herd. This desire to connect with others is valuable for humans given our own innate desire to do so for our own safety and comfort. Further, our modern society tends to promote an individualistic culture, so interacting with highly social animals that live within a collective model can be a therapeutic environment for people as they learn to process their own emotions and learn valuable skills such as

connection, collaboration, and leadership (Buck, Bean, & de Marco, 2017).

Over the last couple of decades, equine assisted therapies have been used and tested in both adults and children with the goal of improving a variety of mental health issues and other psychological endpoints in a wide variety of different populations (White-Lewis, 2019). People who have been affected by trauma have become one of the main groups that have been documented in the scientific literature as potentially benefiting from equine assisted therapies (Palomar-Ciria & Bello, 2023). The effect of trauma can be chronic and may lead to disability and other psychiatric problems. The use of experiential and mind/body approaches that build resilience and enhance recovery, such as equine assisted therapies, has been growing as a treatment option for trauma survivors. Equine assisted





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therapies are especially helpful as they combine the benefits of experiential approaches with the healing experience of interacting with horses (Buck et al., 2017). More specifically, horses, being large prey animals, are by nature hypervigilant, and as a result trauma survivors may find therapeutic advantage in interacting with another sentient being, albeit much larger, with similar wariness of the world. Further, interacting with horses requires transparency and trust on both sides of the relationship, creating a much-needed sense of safety within the therapeutic setting (Buck et al., 2017). Recently, Palomar-Ciria and Bello (2023) reviewed the scientific literature of equine assisted therapy as a treatment for PTSD and concluded that equine assisted therapies were able to improve PTSD symptoms, as well as other variables such as anxiety, depression, and quality of life. For example, Earles, Vernon, and Yetz (2015) examined the efficacy of a 6 weeklong, once weekly,

equine-assisted therapy program in a sample of 16 trauma survivors. After the final session, participants indicated a statistically significant reduction in posttraumatic stress symptoms, less generalized anxiety, less depression symptoms, and less severe emotional responses to trauma compared to the beginning of the program. They also were found to have an increase in the use of mindfulness strategies and a decrease in alcohol consumption.

Equine assisted therapies have also been found to be especially valuable for children and adolescents with and without behavioural and mental health issues (Kendall et al., 2015). While findings have been mixed, several research studies to date have found that after participating in equine assisted therapies, children and adolescents seem to benefit by indicating improvement in self-esteem, social skills, and self-regulation, as well as

reduced anxiety and depression (Lentini & Knox, 2015). For example, a randomized trial of 131 fifth through eighth graders demonstrated the effect of attending an equine facilitated learning program on basal cortisol, a biological measure of stress (Pendry, Smith, & Roeter, 2014). After a duration of 11 weeks, children who attended the once-weekly equine facilitated learning program indicated a moderate decrease in basal cortisol compared to a control group. While cortisol is an important proxy measure of stress in general, in children it may be an even more critical predictor of mental health than in adults. High basal cortisol during childhood—during the critical developmental period of the brain—can lead to the development of stress-related disorders in adolescence and later psychopathology. Thus, reducing stress and basal cortisol in childhood is paramount to increasing the likelihood of optimal mental health in adolescence and beyond.

Potentially, the cadenced motion of the horse, the soothing effect of the horse's body heat, the positive effect on cortisol, oxytocin, and serotonin, and the modulating effect on heart rate are all mechanisms that explain how interacting with horses can reduce stress, improve mood, and decrease negative behav-

iours (Garcia-Gomez, Guerrero-Barona, Garcia-Pena, Rodriguez-Jimenez, & Moreno-Manso, 2020). Further, reduction in blood pressure, respiratory rate, and positive changes in neuroendocrine markers have also documented after interactions with animals in general. In a recent systematic review, Garcia-Gomez et al. (2020) examined the research to date that has objectively examined the effect of participation in equine assisted activities on biological measures of stress. The researchers found that in almost all studies participation in equine assisted activities resulted in favourable effects on heart rate variability, resulting in activation of the parasympathetic nervous system, inducing a state of relaxation. Although studies of the benefits of equine-assisted therapies are in their infancy, the findings from research to date are promising, suggesting considerable benefit of this modality of alternative care for adults and children for improving mental health and behavioural outcomes.

Visitation: Being in the presence of animals has been long documented as having a relaxing effect on humans. Being with animals can result in a pleasurable and calming experience due to the release of serotonin and endorphins, and reduction in stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline

(Koukourikos, Georgopoulou, Kourkouta, & Tsaloglidou, 2019). As a result, visits by specially trained animals and their handlers to nursing homes, hospitals, rehabilitation centres, and other facilities have been increasing tremendously over the last few decades. While dogs have been traditionally used as therapy animals for visitation, horses have in recent times been increasingly used as well. Horses have been found to make good animals for visitation because, as prey animals, they are highly attuned to human emotion and can detect and respond to changes in a human's emotional state and have a general calming effect on people interacting with them. Recently, a study by Reynolds et al. (2020) of airport travellers at an international airport and residential and commuter college students, found that after an interaction with trained miniature therapy horses, participants indicated significant decreases in negative mood and current stress, and significant increases in positive mood, suggesting temporary benefits after interactions with miniature therapy horses. A study by Matsuura et al. (2020) of interacting with miniature horses showed that improvements in mood may be related to changes in human cerebral activity. In that study, the researchers compared the effect of stroking a stuffed toy horse compared to stroking a real

miniature horse on brain activity. Results indicated stroking the real horse activated the right frontopolar area of the brain while stroking the toy horse did not. The researchers concluded this as meaningful, as the frontopolar area of the brain is considered the most important area in terms of human cognitive function given it plays an important role in complex, higher order behaviour. Consequently, simply stroking horses may increase function in the frontopolar area of the brain, which may in turn have benefits for improving mood, cognitive function, and behaviour.

While the use of horses for visitation is still greatly outnumbered by dogs, horses are gaining in popularity. While dogs may be more convenient animals to use in some cases for visitation, horses are generally considered more "exotic" as most people do not have usual access to them, thus making them appealing to interact with. Further, horses used in visitation are gentle and calm, eliciting a relaxing effect on humans. As horses are used more in visitation type therapy work, the potential benefits of interacting with horses in this capacity will be likely further documented in research.

Recreation: Riding and being with horses recreationally have also been found to have benefits

for wellbeing in nontherapeutic settings. Horseback riding frequently occurs outside, which combines the effect of physical activity with being in the natural environment, which itself has been found to have physical and psychological health benefits, including improvement in self-esteem and mood (Pretty, Peacock, Hine, Sellens, South, & Griffin, 2007). Beyond the effect of physical activity outdoors is the benefit of the horse-human relationship itself. Qualitative research has suggested that the horse-human relationship may serve as a type of therapy or strategy for maintaining well-being through repeated pleasurable interactions between humans and horses (Davis, Maurstad, & Dean, 2014). A survey by the British Horse Society of riders in the United Kingdom found that horseback riding served as the only form of physical activity for 39% of the sample, suggesting that without it many would be otherwise sedentary (Church, Taylor, Maxwell, Gibson, & Twomey, 2010). Participants also indicated that the sense of well-being they achieved when interacting with horses strongly motivated them to ride regularly, which seemingly served as a unique motivator to stay active that is not seen in many other sports. Finally, participants indicated that horseback riding stimulated positive psychological feelings, both from interactions with horses and from being outdoors and in nature. Horse owners in Canada echo the findings of this research, with 96% of horse owners indicating in a Canada-wide survey that they agree that horses contribute to human health and well-being (Millen, 2023).

Many horse owners, riders, and other people who interact with horses attest to the therapeutic nature of riding and being with horses. As horses get used and appreciated more for their healing properties, more research will be warranted to document what the benefits are, and the mechanisms that account for these outcomes. Until then, people who interact with horses already can

attest to the special feelings they have when interacting with horses, be it in a riding capacity, groundwork, or just being near them.



The Benjamin Project 2025 Fundraising Calendar

For the last ten years, The Benjamin Project has produced a wall calendar, donating proceeds of sales to animal advocacy initiatives. For 2025, we were pleased to feature animal-related books, written by Benjamin Project supporters, as well as the two *Benjamin* books written by Malcolm Bernstein.

Calendars are still available. Visit www.thebenjaminproject.ca to order your copy.

Losing One Angel, and Adopting Another

By Lisa Browning

I never wanted a Bernese Mountain Dog. Although I am most definitely a dog lover, and they are, most definitely, gorgeous dogs, it was not my first choice. It was my (then) partner who wanted a Bernese, so a Bernese is what we got.

I fell in love with Mandy from the first moment I saw her. She was the runt of the litter, and seemed shy and a little bit scared when we first went to see the puppies. On the drive home, she snuggled into my lap, and we became inseparable from that moment on.



My ex-partner was abusive. It was the reason I ultimately left him. And I took Mandy with me. I made that decision immediately after coming home to find Mandy being dragged across the back yard by her collar, because she “peed in the wrong spot on the lawn.” There was no way I would

leave her with a man who could harm her, just as he had harmed me. He knew me well enough to know not to argue with that decision.

I was blessed to have Mandy for about 12 years after that. She lived until she was 13—a long life for that particular breed.

But in June of 2023, I made the agonizing decision to have her put down. She had been dealing with degenerative myelopathy for quite some time, and I knew the time had come.

I had a vet come to the house, and it was a bittersweet experience. Heartbreaking to have to say goodbye, but peaceful at the same time (especially as I knew that I had made the right decision). I said my tearful goodbyes, and gave final hugs and kisses to my companion of 13 years.



I had originally thought I’d get another dog right away, but I decided to give myself some time. It didn’t take long, and in August of that same year I woke up one morning with the knowledge that it was time to start looking.

It was with astonishment that I saw a post on my social media feed, from someone I did not know, and with whom I was not connected, even through other people. Amber ran a local rescue called Safe Paws, and had posted photos of two puppies that she was trying to place – Ashley and her sister, Mary-Kate!



Friends excitedly said to me, “Oh, you should take them both! You’d have the canine Olson twins!!” I almost agreed, until reason took over! I filled out the application for Ashley (something about her eyes drew me to her just a little bit more), and within



face, she added, “You want to take her now, don’t you?!”

And take her I did. Perhaps a bit prematurely, because I realized as I was driving home that I didn’t have a crate, or any food ... and I couldn’t get any food because I didn’t have a crate! Fortunately, a friend had a crate he was no longer using, and Ashley had her safe place, and some food, the next morning!

a few days I received an email, asking if I’d like to come and meet her. Equally astonishing as the social media post itself, it turned out that Amber lived right around the corner from me.

Amber looked at me in confusion. “Your application has been approved,” she said.

Excitedly I asked her when I could take Ashley home. “Anytime in the next two or three days.” Seeing the look on my

In contrast to Mandy, who was always calm and laid back, Ashley is energetic, and excited about everything! She is a constant source of laughter and joy. And like Mandy before her, Ashley became (and still is) my constant companion, my rock, and my source of unconditional love and acceptance. I lost one angel in June of 2023, and gained another in August.

I sat on the floor of her apartment lobby, playing with a very rambunctious puppy! As the minutes went by, and nothing was said about the status of my application, I began to wonder what was going on. Finally I asked, “So what happens now?”

I will be eternally grateful for both of my canine angels.



www.safepawsanimalrescue.com

How Zola—the Zany, Zippy, Zealous Pig—Came To Be

By Arlene Davies-Fuhr

In a writing class in 2023, there was a suggestion to create a story about a pet pig. *Cool*, I thought. *Why not give this one a whirl?* That’s how the first story of Zola came to be. Of course the pig wasn’t called Zola then. That name came later.

I shared my creative piece about the pig with several friends. More than one person said, “You end the story with, ‘The pig and her family had many fascinating adventures together.’ Tell us, what else do they do?” I was goaded into writing another chapter and yet another, about the world’s most audacious pig. It was an emergent project since it developed as folks encouraged me to tell more of Zola’s story. As the book unfolds, Zola learns to play the ukulele and to lecture to audiences. Even though people advise Zola that her dreams are



impossible, Zola herself thinks, “I’ll find a way.” And, incredibly, Zola does. My friends asked, “What other razzmatazz things does that pig do?” Well, it turns out Zola travels the world. She jumps into a submersible to explore under the sea, and she views Earth from the window of a spacecraft. Zola hikes the Camino Trail and ascends Everest. In addition, she becomes an eco-warrior who spends time planting trees to help the environment. Surprisingly, by the end, Zola becomes a quiet, subdued meditator.

After I completed the eight stories, I realized I needed to add more humour. Since I am quite the punster, I included many humorous words. One reader commented, “In this story, you leave no pun unturned.” Another said, “Some think puns are the lowest form of humour, but I think puns are entertaining and brilliant.”

Throughout the journey, Zola reminds people to “Try it. Find a way!” There’s no doubt about it. Zola is one zany, zippy, zealous pig who touches the hearts of young and old alike.

Zola inspired me to donate \$3 of every book I sell to a project that provides ukuleles to elementary school classrooms. As a writer, I think it’s important to discover a way to use my talent so others in the community also experience joy, and as a ukelele player, this seemed like the perfect way to do so!



Zola, the Zany, Zippy, Zealous Pig is available from The One Thousand Trees bookstore at www.onethousandtrees.com.



A Ongoing Celebration of Animals — a series of events in Guelph By Lisa Browning

World Animal Day is an international day of action for animal rights and welfare celebrated annually on October 4, the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals. In 2024, The Benjamin Project hosted a day-long event, complete with speakers, children's storytime and crafts, and a vendors market. This year, we're doing something a little different.

Starting in March, we will be hosting a series of monthly events, at various locations in Guelph, leading up to a vendors market at Harcourt Church, on Saturday, October 4. Not only will we be able to do more, but we won't be "putting all our eggs in one basket," so to speak. If you're not available on October 4, you'll have many other events to choose from!

Here's an overview of what's in store for March and April:

Story and Craft Time with Arlene Davies-Fuhr, author of Zola: The Zany, Zippy, Zealous Pig

Date: Thursday, March 6

Time: 11am-12pm

Location: Children's Reading Room

**The Coyotes of Inverhuron:
a presentation by David Rankine**

Date: Sunday, March 23

Time: 2-4pm

Location: Harcourt United Church

"Honour Your Pets" Day

– ceramic paw prints of your favourite pet(s) from
Play With Clay

– photo buttons and puzzles fromf **Creative Intentions by Katherine Weir**

Date: Saturday, April 12

Time: noon - 4pm

Location: Play With Clay

We're still firming up the details for events from May through October. They'll be available in our Spring and Summer issues, so watch out for that!

Fore more information about any of the above events, visit www.onethousandtrees.com or www.thebenjaminproject.ca.

Animal Awareness Days

January 11 - National Sheep Day
March 1 - National Pig Day
March 23 - National Coyote Day
April 11 - National Pet Day
May 8 - World Donkey Day
June 7 - Butterfly Education & Awareness
June 7 - National Horse Day
June 10 - National Kitten Day
August 8 - National Cat Day
August 26 - National Dog Appreciation Day
September 17 - National Fox Day
September 26 - National Alpaca Day
October 4 - World Animal Day
December 9 - National Llama Day

THIS MONTH'S CONTRIBUTORS



Malcolm Bernstein and his wife Helen founded The Benjamin Project in 2014. In addition to his involvement with the project, Malcolm works as a management consultant in Toronto, and a volunteer with Toronto Humane Society, Meals on Wheels, and Out of the Cold.



Brian Brown, a recognized 2023 Canadian Institute for Public Safety Research and Treatment (CIPSRT) Mental Health Champion, was diagnosed with PTSI and severe PTSD in 2015, and has worked tirelessly within the fire service sector to assist others in navigating mental health challenges. Brian has helped launch the New Brunswick Fire Peer Support Network, a platform that offers resources and peer support to 167 fire stations and approximately 5,500 firefighters across the province.



Lisa Browning is the founder and publisher at One Thousand Trees, specializing in books/stories about empowerment and overcoming trauma and adversity, as well as mental health and self-care issues. She also provides or can help to facilitate networking, educational and creative opportunities in these areas. No matter what she does, Lisa is inspired to make a difference in this world, to empower others, and help them realize their passion, through telling their story and speaking their truth.



Arlene Davies-Fuhr was an English as a Second Language teacher, a community college English instructor, and a Mennonite pastor. She enjoys playing the ukulele, dulcimer, and djembe drum. Arlene is quite unconventional and has been called the Queen of Razzmatazz. It's not a stretch to see ways that Arlene and Zola are similar.



Kristina Karvinen is a Professor in the School of Physical and Health Education at Nipissing University in North Bay, ON. Dr. Karvinen's research has primarily focused on exploring the benefits of physical activity for cancer survivors, physical activity motivation, and relationships with companion animals for improving physical activity and well-being. She is also an avid horse person and enjoys riding the trails with her horse, Lucky.



Donna Kaye has been an Early Childhood Educator, Early Literacy Specialist, and Forest & Nature School Facilitator for more than four decades. She lives in Cherry Valley, where she enjoys long walks in the woods, gardening, and exploring the beauty of the natural world.



Katherine A. Weir, Guelphite, feminist, mother, grandmother, furkid mother, bereaved, First Nations and Metis Peoples' supporter/honourer and nature lover, has been writing since the beginning of time. She focuses her creative genius on poetry and short stories, and visual art genres of pottery and mixed media, as well as sewing.

Would you like to contribute to a future issue? Email lisa@onethousandtrees.com.



the
Benjamin
Project



Shaping minds. Changing the world.



BENJAMIN'S MISSION

The Benjamin Project is a non-profit initiative educating children on responsible pet ownership and animal stewardship, and raising funds for shelters, sanctuaries and rescue.

Imagine a world where ...

- all children could experience the joy of nurturing a pet and learning about the compassion and intelligence which pets possess
- there is no more abuse, and companion animals are protected by legislation as sentient beings and not as property
- every young person's voice is heard when it comes to advocating for responsible pet stewardship
- the need for shelters, rescues, and animal welfare organizations becomes obsolete because every animal has a home

All it takes is ONE generation to create such a world.

Please look through our site to find out how you can support us.

www.thebenjaminproject.ca

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