

Sheltered from the storm: Dog trainer saves 30 four-legged lives from Katrina

By Christian Boone, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, December 10, 2005

Photos by Frank Niemeir/Staff

As Hurricane Katrina evacuee Jean Manino recalls her journey from Chalmette, La., to Trion, Ga., tears well up. But she's too busy to let them fall, what with 14 mouths to feed.

Before the hurricane, Manino ran a dog obedience school and kennel in now-decimated St. Bernard Parish. As the storm approached, the professional trainer rounded up her charges, 30 in all, loaded them into a horse trailer, helped her elderly mother into her van and headed north.

Now, like many of her neighbors, she longs to return home and give up her hotel room, which will be financed by the government for only another month anyway. But her task is made that much more difficult by the condition of her St. Bernard Parish property — and her vow to stick with her dogs.

In the days that followed, people across the country were moved by the images of stranded animals on rooftops, left behind as residents fled to safety.

Some people volunteered to rescue pets; Manino was way ahead of them.

"These dogs are too special just to be discarded," said Manino, an obedience trainer since 1979. "And the dogs that weren't mine, I felt I had a responsibility to the owners. I didn't have the right to just give them up."

That was more than New Orleans dermatologist Patrick Coleman expected. He and his wife were in San Francisco on business when Katrina struck. They had boarded their two Dobermans with Manino, and it was the first time they had worked with her.

The Colemans spent the next five days on their computers, scouring local message boards for any information on Manino and their dogs, assuming the worst.

"We talked to her just before the storm hit, and the last we had heard was that Jean



Hurricane Katrina evacuee and dog trainer Jean Manino plays with one of her golden retrievers Monday in her hotel room in Trion.



A half-hour before this photograph was taken, this golden retriever's owner told Manino to have the dog euthanized.

planned on riding it out," said Coleman, who lost his home to the flooding. "Losing our dogs would've added insult to injury."

Finally, they were contacted by someone who knew where Manino was. The couple took a red-eye flight out of San Francisco to Atlanta, then drove the two hours to the Summerville barn space she's borrowing, where they reunited with their dogs, and their dogs' savior.

"The minute he heard my voice, one of our dogs, Jax, came running through the barn door right to me," Coleman recalled. It was, he said, his first good moment in the days following the hurricane.

"It's pretty amazing that she saved these animals when so many people had left their own behind."

Fourteen of the other dogs Manino brought with her from Chalmette have been reunited with their owners, who were out of town on previously planned trips before the storm made landfall.

Some of the dogs were never claimed, and two died, leaving her with 14.

She owns many of the dogs that survived, including a fresh litter of prized Copperfield golden retriever show dogs born just before Katrina hit. Three of them are set for surgery to repair arthritic elbows, according to Dr. Alan Cross, a veterinary orthopedic surgeon with Georgia Veterinarian Specialists in Sandy Springs.

Cross said the condition is unrelated to their post-hurricane housing, but the procedures will be costly: about \$7,500 for the three puppies.

That's making the already daunting process of returning home even more difficult for Manino, who temporarily is making her home in a cramped motel room, which she shares with her two adult retrievers, just north of Rome.

Few people have returned to St. Bernard Parish. Her brother visited Manino's home once and reported that it's uninhabitable. She also was victimized by looters, who, according to Manino, took most of her equipment, everything from training collars to a new door that had been installed in the kennel.

Until the federal government stops paying the tab on Jan. 7, she'll continue to live at the Carousel Inn in Trion, where she survives on dwindling savings. An old friend, who wished to remain anonymous, contacted her after the storm hit and offered to board the dogs on her property in nearby Summerville, where the friend and her husband are building a new home.

The dogs are kept in horse stalls, not quite the surroundings they're accustomed to but one of the few blessings, of late, that Manino can claim.

"I'm so grateful just to have a place for them," she said, even though she loses money each day she remains in Georgia, another reason why returning to Chalmette has become almost a necessity. "That's where my clientele is, and I've worked a long time to build up my business."

But for now, like many evacuees, Manino has little choice because there's simply no place to live in the New Orleans area.

And now there are the mounting vet bills. Just feeding the dogs costs Manino nearly \$200 a week.

"Basically, I'm a homeless person, with baggage," she said.

"One day I had a successful business, and the next day I'm a street person."

Manino is waiting to hear back from FEMA about a mobile home that she would place on her property in St. Bernard Parish, once basic services are restored.

But there are no guarantees she'll get the temporary housing. All Manino knows is that she will be somewhere else after Jan. 7.

And she won't leave Georgia alone: "We came as a group, and we're leaving as a group," Manino says.