

Michele Oka, co-founder of Native Animal Rescue, dies

Bio - O
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SENTINEL CORRESPONDENT

SANTA CRUZ — The first animal saved by Santa Cruz's Native Animal Rescue was a great blue heron, injured and left at the center's doorstep in a cardboard box.

That was in 1980. Since then, the volunteer nonprofit annually has taken in 1,500 to 2,000 local injured wildlife, many of which were hurt as a result of colliding with human habitat.



OKA

Michele Kathleen Oka was one of three founders who started the center in response to what she saw as the frequent euthanizing of injured wildlife by the Santa Cruz SPCA.

Oka lived her life trying to steer animals out of harms way while helping people learn how to respect the animals' natural environment.

After a lengthy illness that left Oka house-bound for the last year, she died July 22 at her Santa Cruz home. She was 49.

When not helping to run the center, Oka worked for UC Santa Cruz as an animal control officer, or "animal 'care' officer as she preferred to be called," said Deb White, a colleague and friend to Oka.

White said Oka always kept her focus on the positive aspects of the job: "rescuing animals from being hit by a car, keeping a child from being bit by a dog, saving injured wildlife," she said.

Oka also lectured local groups about the need for animal control and how to live among wildlife, said White.

White took over the UC position when Oka stepped down due to health issues in 1989.

"She was a model animal control person," said White.

Oka received a bachelor's degree in environmental studies with an

emphasis in biological sciences from UC Santa Barbara.

She received hands-on bird and land mammal training at Wildlife Rescue Inc. in Mountain View. She was trained to house and treat injured and oiled sea birds at International Bird Rescue in Berkeley. And she learned how to work with raptors at the San Francisco Zoo Raptor Program.

Her hands-on work led Oka to become specialized in the rehabilitation of song birds.

Mary Graydon-Fontana, Oka's close friend, said anytime she found an injured bird or a wild animal in her backyard she called Oka, especially when her cat was at risk.

Oka helped Graydon-Fontana feel secure that her cat could outrun the possums lurking in her backyard, she said.

"She had all this information in her head," said Graydon-Fontana.

Even when Oka got sick and was unable to physically tend animals, Graydon-Fontana said Oka still found ways to help protect wildlife by writing letters to senators, assembly members and local newspapers.

"She had this compassion. She always did what was good for animals," said White.

Oka's husband, Rodney, said her work came home with her.

"You had to be careful which blender you used in our house," he said, "because one would be used for making 'bug butter,'" a mixture of meal worms and other edibles for birds.

They also ate their meals sitting next to "Big Beak," an Evening Grosbeak finch that Oka took in after someone shot its wing.

"She would go hand pick pyracantha berries, buy meal worms, she'd pick maple seeds to feed the bird," he said.

Unable to survive in the wild, Big Beak lived for 14 years with the couple.

Other animals, such as two dogs, a cat and a pair of walking stick insects named Tina and Louise also found a permanent home with the Okas.

Michele Kathleen Oka

BORN: March 19, 1954, in Monterey.

DIED: July 22, 2003, at her Santa Cruz home.

EDUCATION: Received a bachelor's in environmental studies with an emphasis in biological sciences from UC Santa Barbara.

OCCUPATION: Wildlife animal rescue worker and animal control officer.

SURVIVORS: Husband Rodney Oka of Santa Cruz; and brother Alan Herren, sister-in-law Joanne Herren and niece Annaliese Herren, all of San Leandro.

SERVICES: None planned.

DONATIONS: Canine Companions for Independence, P.O. Box 446 Santa Rosa, CA 95402-0446; Guide Dogs for the Blind, P.O. Box 151200, San Rafael, CA 94915-1200; The Nature Conservancy, 4245 N. Fairfax Drive, Suite 100, Arlington, VA 22203; or favorite charity.

Today, Michele Oka's vision to save injured wildlife lives on at Native Animal Rescue.

The center is a popular location for the county's police, sheriffs, firefighters and general public to drop off wildlife in need of medical attention.

The center receives injured wildlife animals 24-hours, seven days a week at 1855 17th Ave. in Santa Cruz. To contact the center call 462-0726.

Contact Rachel Barron at rbarron@santa-cruz.com.