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Chicago Tribune

T R I B U THE UNIVERSITY OF YOU

Remarkable Woman

Paula Fasseas

PAWS founder talks about her ever-expanding furry family

BY WILLIAM HAGEMAN | Tribune reporter

Over the past 15 years, tens of thousands of stray and abandoned dogs and cats have found new homes — new lives — thanks to one golfer's good day on the links.

John Paulos, Paula Fasseas' godfather, showed up at her parents' Tucson (Ariz.) home when she was less than a year old and dropped off a present. It was Daisy, a beagle mix.

"He won her in a golf game," says Fasseas, founder of PAWS, Chicago's largest no-kill facility. "My father put a doghouse in the yard for her. She never used it. She wouldn't even set foot in it. She was in my bed from Day 1."

Daisy was just the first in a steady line of critters over the years. There was Kukla, a pound-bound Chihuahua mix stray she brought home from a drive-in when she was 15; Thelma and Louise, the cats who joined her, husband Peter and children Alexis and Drew in the family's Astor Street condo in Chicago; Pippen, a stray the family had rescued from certain doom on the island of Crete and for whom PAWS' adoption center is named; and today's Scottie P, an 8- or 9-year-old poodle mix, and Piper, a 15-year-old terrier mix. (Both are, she says, "failed fosters," supposedly temporary residents who ended up permanent family members.)

PAWS was started in 1997 as an advocacy group, but soon expanded into adoptions and spay and neuter programs because of the need. PAWS has found homes for more than 21,000 dogs and cats via adoptions (they're at about 5,000 a year) and some 7,500 more animals have gone into foster care (about 600 go into foster homes annually).

A big adoption event is Angels With Tails, which has shelters and rescue organizations from all over the city bring animals to Michigan Avenue, where they are shown off in various stores. More than 3,000 dogs and cats have been adopted through Angels With Tails. The 15th such event, in May, included 19 other rescue groups and shelters.

"I went to the city pound," Fasseas says, recalling how the event got started, "and there were all these beautiful animals, and they were putting down 90 percent of them. I didn't think my friends would come down to Western Avenue (the location of Animals Care & Control), but they would come to Michigan Avenue. That's how we started Angels With Tails."

Q: Where does your love of animals come from?

A: I think maybe because my

parents were gone a lot (they were in the restaurant business) and my dogs were like siblings. They became family members. My sister loved to read and locked herself in her room with books, and I played with my dogs. I bonded with them. We never know what does factor into it. But I love animals. All animals.

Q: How did you end up in Chicago?

A: I lived (in Tucson) about 20 years, through high school and my first year of college. Then I met my (future) husband, who worked in the Illinois attorney general's office. I moved here and we got married. I got my undergraduate degree at DePaul and my MBA at the University of Chicago, and in between we had our two children. We started a business in 1976, Moby Nick's bar and disco on Rush Street, and it did well. We later heard about a small community bank that was available, so we took a second mortgage on our condo and bought 25 percent of the bank (North Community Bank). It was in Wrigleyville, one office, 15 employees. I was in charge of development. We opened a second (branch) at Clark and Fullerton ... and we branched to the Lincoln Park and Lakeview areas. We grew to 97

Reader nominations

We get so many nominations for truly deserving Remarkable Women that we want to feature a few more each week. And don't forget: If you think you know a Remarkable Woman, please email TribU@tribune.com. Nomination videos are also welcome!

By The Hand founder
I nominate Donnita Meredith

Travis for your Remarkable Woman feature. She created By The Hand Club for Kids, an inner-city after-school program. Please note that Mayor Rahm Emanuel declared last Monday the By The Hand Club for Kids Literacy Day in Chicago.

"In March 2001, Donnita, a successful advertising agency owner, started the program with 16 kids in Cabrini-Green, one of Chicago's

toughest neighborhoods. ... Her vision of improving their lives and breaking the poverty cycle motivated her to leave her job managing the agency to dedicate herself as a full-time volunteer to By The Hand Club for Kids. Now serving 851 children in the four most under-resourced neighborhoods, with plans next year for 1,000 kids, BTH provides them with academic, physical and emotional skills needed to improve their grades, graduate, go to college and have a life of hope and promise. ...

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“My sister loved to read and locked herself in her room with books, and I played with my dogs. I bonded with them. We never know what does factor into it. But I love animals. All animals.”

— Paula Fasseas

ANTONIO PEREZ/
TRIBUNE NEWS-
PAPERS PHOTO

offices and 1,100 employees.

Q: How'd you go from that to the animal welfare community?

A: My daughter. She had volun-

teered at a traditional humane society (at 15) and was shocked when she saw that animals were being killed. I took three cats from her (that she brought home from

the facility). ... The open door policy meant a lot of people were dropping off their pets, and they were putting them down without the people knowing.

“Donnita saw the need to reach the children early. One-third of Chicago fourth-graders are not reading at their grade level. Reading is the best predictor of academic success, which is the only way out of poverty. As she built the program, she realized access to health care was also needed. Most of all, these children needed hope and emotional support.”

“By The Hand is doing what Chicago Public Schools has been

unable to do on its own. By partnering with schools to identify those at risk, BTH also embraces the teachers, parents, corporate sponsors and community leaders in its efforts to transform lives. ...

“By The Hand has no revenue or endowment. Each year Donnita raises the money needed to support more and more children (2012 budget, \$4.8 million or \$5,700 per child). She builds lasting partnerships with the schools and the city, individual

philanthropists and everyday volunteers, community leaders and parents. But mostly, she takes the children — nearly 1,000 of them — by the hand and mentors them until they are empowered and equipped to walk independently as responsible, productive adults.”

(See bythehand.org for more information.)

— From Deborah S. Fullerton's nomination

Q: So you started PAWS.

A: We had a storefront, on Clark Street. We got some cats from the pound, got volunteers to work seven nights a week. I soon realized adoptions were very important, but we had to do something on the spay and neuter front.

Q: And that was the Lurie Spay/Neuter Clinic, which opened in 2001 and offers free and low-cost services.

A: It was not being done in low-income areas. There was no problem (with pet overpopulation) in Lincoln Park or Wrigleyville. But it was in the low-income areas. So we opened in Little Village. I'd say we've had more than 100,000 surgeries since it was opened. What's most important, that's 100,000 people who couldn't afford it. That's really why it's in Little Village, to make it inconvenient for people from areas where they could afford it, and closer to the people who can't.

Q: It's working.

A: When we started, PAWS had 250 kittens on our waiting list. People knew that if they took them to shelters they'd be euthanized. We told them: Put them in your bathroom, we'll vaccinate them and get them in our program when we have space. To show that spaying and neutering is working, today we have no waiting list.

Q: What is the best part of your job?

A: I think the volunteers and the animals. I love them equally. We always say, the animals are the easy part. This is a people business. If you don't like people, you don't belong in this business.

bhageman@tribune.com

THIS WEEK'S TOP STORIES

chicagotribune.com/tribu

Virtual offices

See what happens when traditionally virtual companies make the transition to office-bound employees.

Smell you later

A new study says the scent of jasmine can help with hand-eye coordination, which in turn helps bowling scores, batting stats and more.

Hanging in there

Looking for a job? The best trait to have is tenacity, says columnist Daneen Skube.

TRIBU SEMINARS

For information about these and other events, go to tribnation.com/events



TribU: Creating Your Own Blog, Part 2.

You understand how blogging

works — now learn how to build your own blog. In this intermediate class, learn to build a blog on WordPress, a free blogging platform. Also learn how to customize your blog's design and track your blog's web traffic. 9 a.m. Tuesday, Tribune Tower, 435 N. Michigan Ave., \$60

TribU: Creating Your Own Blog, Part 3.

You've already started your own blog — now it's time to grow your audience. In this intermediate-level class, learn to write blog posts that get shared. Then learn how to promote your blog using social media and SEO (search engine optimization). 9 a.m. June 26, Tribune Tower, 435 N. Michigan Ave., \$60

Stay tuned for more TribU classes and events!

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Ideas? Comments? Send what's on your mind to sunday@tribune.com.

Nominate someone remarkable

TRIBU Remarkable Woman features a Chicago-area standout who captures our imagination, tells a compelling story and offers insight or inspiration. Do you have a life lesson we could all appreciate? Want to nominate someone you know? Or if you have a question for our Remarkable Woman, write us TribU@tribune.com.