
RYAN HOSPITAL

HELPING RED PAW SAVE PETS' LIVES

BY KAREN GROSS

AS A PHILADELPHIA FIREFIGHTER AND RED CROSS EMERGENCY RESPONDER, JEN LEARY SAW THE SAME TRAGIC SCENARIO PLAY OUT AGAIN AND AGAIN. WHEN FIRES OR OTHER RESIDENTIAL DISASTERS STRUCK, THERE WAS NO ORGANIZATION TO COORDINATE EMERGENCY CARE OR ASSISTANCE FOR PETS, OR TO RETURN TO THE SCENE TO CONTINUE SEARCHING FOR ANIMALS THAT MAY BE HIDDEN OR TRAPPED.

“This is what keeps me up at night,” Leary says. “I can’t imagine how many animals are left in fire buildings every day and just left there to die.”

In 2011, Leary brought a proposal to the American Red Cross: to work in conjunction with their responders when there are pets on scene. Eight months later, the Red Paw Emergency Relief Team was born. In 2013, Red Paw was added to the City of Philadelphia’s Emergency Response Plan. To date, Red Paw has assisted more than 2,000 animals as an emergency response nonprofit organization.

Leary’s generosity of spirit, can-do attitude, and tireless commitment to animals has earned Red Paw an ever-growing national reputation, numerous awards and grants, and a corps of around 500 volunteers. She has been profiled by CNN and was recently named by *Reader’s Digest* as one of “13 Unsung Heroes Who Will Restore Your Faith in Our Country.”

In addition to the American Red Cross, Red Paw works in conjunction with the Philadelphia Fire Department, Philadelphia Office of Emergency Management, and other public and private disaster relief organizations to provide round-the-clock emergency assistance including search and rescue, transport, and shelter. Red Paw even facilitates spay/neuter services, vaccinations, and foster housing, if needed. All services are offered free of charge to pet owners.

Ryan Hospital has become Red Paw’s key partner for emergency veterinary care—especially for animals that have been critically injured.

“Penn Vet is our go-to for emergency care,” Leary says. “They have been so supportive, from the front desk to the specialists. They are so good with our animals and our clients. Once we found out how easy it was to work with Penn, we started bringing more cases there.”



Jen Leary of Red Paw assists an animal on scene in Philadelphia (at left) and holds a tiny kitten rescued from a fire (below).

“I found out about Red Paw when Jen brought an animal in,” recalls Dr. Deborah Mandell, V’93, Staff Veterinarian in Ryan Hospital’s Emergency Service and Adjunct Associate Professor, Section of Critical Care. Coincidentally, Mandell also serves as the American Red Cross’ national Pet Care Advisor as well as a member of its Scientific Advisory Council.

“[Jen and I] were both working with the Red Cross. I got to know Jen because she was the one who brought the animals in, and so I got to know how absolutely amazing she is and what she has done,” Mandell says.

“She sends the most critical ones here,” continues Mandell. “The most important first treatment is supplemental oxygen, and Penn Vet has state-of-the-art oxygen cages. We also see and treat corneal ulcers, burns, and neurologic complications from carbon monoxide toxicity. For many cases, supplemental oxygen and time is all they need.”

Red Paw and Ryan Hospital value patience and persistence, even when the outlook seems grim.

“There was a cat, Joy Joy, who the firefighters thought was deceased,” Mandell says. “She was covered in soot and very neurologically inappropriate, flat. She could not initially stand or get up. She was

hospitalized for two days, and her neurologic status slowly improved. She was able to stand and eat but was not able to walk. She went to a foster home and continued to improve and is doing great now. It was extremely rewarding to see her recover.”

In addition, Leary noted, “Red Paw did search and rescue and found Joy Joy’s sibling cats still inside the fire dwelling. All of them were taken to Penn Vet for care.”

Darius, a large pit bull-American bulldog mix, was pulled by firefighters from a burning home in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, and rushed to Ryan Hospital by the Red Paw team. Put immediately on oxygen, Darius seemed to be recovering. But after 24 hours, he took a turn for the worse.

“It was quite phenomenal, actually,” Mandell says. “He was initially weaned off of supplemental oxygen but he then started having significant coughing. He coughed up something that looked like the inside layer of his trachea. We put him back in the oxygen cage, started IV fluids, IV antibiotics, GI protectants, and nebulization.”

“We weren’t sure if he was going to make it,” Leary recalls. “He wasn’t eating in the hospital. [Penn Vet] suggested that the owner come in to the hospital, and the staff worked with the owner. He perked up and he made it.”



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Darius (above, at left), a large pit bull-American bulldog mix, was pulled by firefighters from a burning home and rushed to Ryan Hospital by the Red Paw team. A cat (at right) was reunited with her kittens after they were treated for smoke inhalation.

A recent tug-at-your-heartstrings case involved a litter of five tiny kittens, rescued by Philadelphia firefighters and transported by Red Paw to Ryan Hospital, where they were treated for smoke inhalation. But despite an extensive search, the mother cat was nowhere to be found.

The next morning, the kittens were released with a clean bill of health and brought back to the fire scene to help with the search. It didn’t take long for the momma to hear her babies’ cries and come out of hiding. Reunited and safe, the little family would stay at Red Paw headquarters until the kittens were weaned and could be fostered in the homes of volunteers. While in Red Paw care, the cats were briefly “internet famous” with a live streaming web show, so everyone could keep an eye on them.

Jennifer Baris, a Certified Veterinary Technician at Ryan Hospital’s Emergency Service for nearly a decade, was so inspired by Leary’s work that she now volunteers as Red Paw’s adoption coordinator.

“Most animals go back to their owners when they get back on their feet,” Baris explains. In those few cases when an owner is unable to take back their pet after a

disaster, Red Paw will step in to find the animal a new home rather than entering the shelter system. “This helps take the weight off area shelters to deal with these animals with nowhere to go,” she says.

Last year, Ryan Hospital assisted 62 animals brought in by Red Paw. “We’ve had non-dog and cat species, let’s just say that!” laughs Mandell. She remembers birds, snakes, turtles, and even a tarantula.

Ryan Hospital provides a discount to Red Paw, and the veterinary staff goes above and beyond whenever possible to assist pets and pet owners in need.

“I think because we whole-heartedly appreciate, understand, and know what they are doing, we want to be able to support Red Paw and the pet owners in any way we can,” Mandell says.

Right now, Red Paw serves Eastern Pennsylvania and South Jersey, but “The goal is to go national. I really want this service to be accessible to everyone,” says Leary, adding, “We wanted to hook up with the best. What we’re doing, no one else in the country is doing, so we definitely wanted to be with the hospital that is always on the cutting edge, and Penn Vet is.”