

Major Health Issues and Your Pets

By Shauna Hill

[NOTE: this article does not give medical advice nor is it meant to replace thorough and thoughtful discussion of any health concerns with your physician and family.]

Any one of us can find ourselves dealing with a major health crisis. The doctor may tell you to get rid of your pets for various health reasons. Family and friends, with good intentions, may also encourage you to relieve yourself of the burden of caring for your pets so you can focus on your own health. What can be done? I wanted to share the experiences of two of Mickaboo's volunteers who have dealt with, or continue to deal with, serious personal health issues, and what helped them keep their beloved feathered and furry family members. I found their stories encouraging and hope you enjoy getting to know them. They are Kathie Taylor and Sherry Helms.

First let's meet Kathie Taylor



Please tell us about yourself

I grew up in the Bay Area and worked for Shaklee, a local supplement company, for 18 years and then made a career move, closer to my home in Berkeley, where I now work for Clif Bar in Emeryville.

I was first introduced to parrots when I met my husband who had a 25-year-old wild-caught Lilac Crowned Amazon, named Woody. It took a very long time for me to gain his trust, but eventually he was bonded to me and I couldn't leave the room without him calling for my attention. OK, I spoiled him, even taking him into the shower with me each morning so as to not wake up the neighbors with his squawks, which sounded much like a crow with a bullhorn.

[Author's Note: It was in loving memory of Woody that Kathie made a donation for Figgy, the "Green Crow" and fellow lilac crowned amazon. See Figgy's story in the Mickaboo April 2014 Newsletter.]



Woody

As a child, I had grown up with several parakeets as pets, and I remember hiding under my bed to cry when our first budgie, Petey, died. But Woody was my first adventure with a larger parrot, who eventually became my baby and constant companion, and when he died, I felt so lost, I came to Mickaboo just to be around other birds.

What health challenges have you faced and how has that impacted your family and your feathered/furry companions?

I developed type 1 diabetes when I was 20, and it eventually led to severe complications that I call "all the -opathies" (retinopathy, neuropathy, nephropathy) which translate to partial blindness, loss of nerve function and kidney failure. But I was very lucky to be the grateful recipient of a double organ transplant, ten years ago last month. Then I was on dialysis, which I did myself at home and at work four times a day, and I was on a severely



Woody and Coco

restricted diet. My husband Neill and my friends and family kept constant watch over me, as I was getting quite frail. It was very exhausting and I had experienced so much muscle wasting, I was very weak and could barely walk up one flight of stairs, but I didn't give up.



Neill and Kathie planting trees



Kathie and her mom

Because home dialysis requires a very clean environment to prevent infection, I was advised not to have any animals. However I wasn't about to give up my sweet little Manx kitty, Lucy, or my new found love Woodsy, the Amazon. So I simply prepared a separate room in my apartment with NO ANIMALS ALLOWED, which is where I did my dialysis every day.

I was very lucky to have only been on the waiting list for nine months and only on dialysis for six months when I got the call that changed my life. On February 5, 2004, UCSF told me they had a matching kidney and pancreas, and my life would completely change. I got to throw away my insulin and my dialysis bags and start all over.

Transplants do come with a trade-off, as you have to take medicine for life that suppresses your immune system to prevent rejection, and increases your risk of infection. I was again advised against having pets. But again, after discussions with my physicians and nurses, I made the decision not to give up my "babies", and to take all necessary precautions to lessen any risk.

What has helped you to get through those challenges?

The sense of humor I got from my dad, the love and constant care of my friends, family and especially Neill, being able to spend time with all of the animals I have lived with and loved over the years, and dedicating each day to the memory of my donor.

The irony is that having dealt with many health issues of my own has made it both easier and harder to deal with the many health issues of my own pets. I lost Lucy to kidney failure and Woodsy to cancer as a complication to the Papilloma ("pap") virus. I adopted and nursed until the end another cat, Coco, with inflammatory bowel disease and Desi, with diabetes and heart failure. My only Mickaboo foster bird was Skipper, another Amazon with the pap virus, who had recently lost his mate. Sadly, I had to give him back to his previous foster mom, Shelley, as he was missing his flock, and I couldn't fill that gap. I guess I am just a sucker for the ones who are most in need. But while I couldn't save them, I know that while they were with me, I was able to give them the most out of life as possible.



Desi & Beau



Echo

I currently have two cats: Beau, a beautiful Birman stray who was abandoned in the streets of Oakland, and Echo, a sweet little Siamese who was rescued from a hoarding situation in a house with around 30 cats. I would love to take in another foster bird (or two, or three) but since Woody had the pap virus, I cannot pass along that risk to other healthy birds. So I get my "bird fix" by taking other Mickaboo foster birds to numerous adoption fairs, and spreading the word about Mickaboo as a volunteer.

What advice could you give those who face the difficult decision about their beloved pets and their health issues?

I personally chose not to give up my animals solely because of my own health issues. I listened to the advice of my health care practitioners, and carefully weighed the risks, but in the end I realized that the ability to care for them all had enough of a positive impact on my emotional health that it outweighed any potential physical health risks. I chose to do my best to minimize the risks as much as possible, and promised to work with my doctors in the event of any subsequent health challenges if they should occur. So far, I am going strong with no regret for my choice to keep taking care of my babies.

Thank you, Kathie. The idea of having a separate "clean area" for your treatment is wonderful. It takes an amazing person to do what you and Shelley do for the birds with the pap virus. Your dedication to help those most in need is inspiring!

Now let's meet Sherry Helms:

Tell us about yourself

I was raised in Michigan and spent ten years living in Hawaii with a Navy husband. I started my career in the mortgage industry back in 1983 in Honolulu through a temp agency and continued working in it until June 2007 when I was laid off during the economic downturn.

[Author's Note: I can't remember the year but I recall being the volunteer who visited Sherry's home when she started with Mickaboo. I was impressed with her and the great set up she had for her birds. I knew she was an awesome parront!]

What health challenges have you faced and how has that impacted your family and your feathered/furry companions?

On my birthday in November 2009 I was diagnosed with breast cancer and went through surgery, chemo treatments and radiation through October 2010. I didn't really have any problems caring for the flock during this time and my husband is also very involved in their care and socialization so I don't believe they even knew anything was out of the ordinary! Fast forward to May 2012. That is when I was diagnosed with AML (leukemia) which was a result of the chemotherapy given for the breast cancer. We were told there was a 3% chance of developing another cancer but with that small of a percentage I went ahead with the chemo treatments. Lo and behold, the gal who can't win the lottery no matter how many tickets I buy ended up with AML. I was immediately transferred from my local oncologist to UCSF where I spent 3+ weeks

at a time with a 7-10 day break between hospitalizations through New Year's Eve of 2012. I was in full remission and was told that if it was going to come back it usually happens within the first year. Unfortunately I made it only 10 months and it came back. So I began treatments at UCSF again in early October 2013 and am still going through the same routine as I did in 2012.

What has helped you to get through those challenges?

Luckily my husband is very hands-on with our birds and has taken great care of them and the many bird boarders when they are present. It's funny because my eclectus, yellow collar macaw and one of the African Greys don't care if I'm sporting my bald head around the house but our big macaw gets his "mohawk" feathers up for a few minutes until I've talked to him and he knows it's me!

I have been very lucky to have so many supportive friends, many whom I have met through our love of parrots, and my family's support, both emotional and physical. I just keep myself thinking positive thoughts that I am going to beat this and am not planning on going down without a fight. I've got two young grandsons that I've waited years for and I plan on being around for them and the rest of my human and feathered family.

What advice could you give those who face the difficult decision about their beloved pets and their health issues?

The advice I would give to others who may find themselves in a similar position is to remain positive and accept offers of help. I found it very hard at first to accept help but realized that people are sincere with their offers and really want to help. I owe Fred Cox more than I could ever repay for [standing in for me and] acting as Mickaboo's Interim Eclectus Coordinator during most of these hard times. He has been wonderful!

Thank you Sherry! You amaze me with your endurance and ability to roll with each challenge. My birds love staying at your beautiful home when you pet-sit for me and I know they're safe at the Helms' home :)

I appreciate both of you ladies taking the time to be part of this article and I know we all wish you well.