

Article from "The Mickaboo Rescue Companion:
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Featured Volunteer: Michelle Yesney By Shauna Hill



For our last article of 2016 we wanted to feature our dear Chief Executive Officer, Michelle Yesney. She is in a leadership role but is one of the most approachable people and really works tirelessly to help keep this organization going. So, we wanted to take some time and let folks get to know Michelle a little better with the following interview.

SH: Please tell us a little about yourself.

MY: I was born and raised in the San Joaquin Valley, in central California. I'm a third-generation Californian. I graduated from Fresno State College with a degree in History, married a sailor just returned from Vietnam, and (as a Navy wife) moved from California to Alaska to Washington, D.C. When my daughter was 2 years old, she and I moved back to California and I've lived here ever since.

As a child, I usually had a cat. When I was ten, someone gave my family a budgie and we generally had a budgie for the rest of my childhood. The last budgie my family had was named Cheer and ruled the household. He talked all the time, but his vocabulary changed to reflect the school year. When school was in session, he would say things like "hurry up, hurry up", "Micki, make your bed!", "where's your lunch", and other things he heard a lot during that time of year.

While Corinna, my daughter, was growing up, we tried to have a cat. It turned out that we both were allergic to cats and my allergy had become so severe we had to give the cat to other family members. So, we bought a white rat, which was a great pet, but terribly short-lived. Our next pets were birds - budgies first, and then a cockatiel. The cockatiel had various health problems (leading to our first search for an avian vet), but he lived to be 18 years old. We eventually found Dr. Congdon, who (although we didn't know it at the time) helped to establish the avian medicine certification program (and was also a mentor for Dr. Van Sant, our current vet).

Our first cockatiel, Skywalker, created for both Corinna and me what will undoubtedly be a life-long affection for cockatiels.

SH: How did you become involved with Mickaboo?

MY: After Skywalker's death, we wanted another cockatiel. We found budgies by answering an ad in the paper from someone that wanted to give up her birds (and we took them). Eventually we saw an ad for a cockatiel from the San Jose Animal Shelter. When I responded, they said they didn't have that cockatiel any more - she had gone to a bird rescue. They gave me a phone number for someone who turned out to be Susan Zizumbo (now Zuniga) [Editor: Susan is a long-time Mickaboo volunteer] and Susan talked me into coming to the Basic Bird Care Class in Sunnyvale.

Richard and I still thought we wanted to adopt a cockatiel, but the first call we got from Tammy [Editor: Mickaboo's co-founder] was about three splay-legged baby budgies that had been turned in to the Oakland Shelter for euthanasia. I was at work, but I called the shelter and the staff person there said her father would keep the budgies overnight so I could pick them up in the morning. The shelter had no way to care for the birds.

I should mention here that I had NO idea what I was supposed to do. I found myself with three severely splay-legged baby budgies in a cardboard box along with some chicken feed and dog food, and not a

clue about what to do next. I called Tammy and she told me to take the budgies to an avian vet. My vet had retired, so she sent me to For the Birds. I wish I had that visit on video - I didn't know what to tell the receptionist, no idea what to tell Dr. Van Sant about what I wanted her to do, and not a ghost of a thought about what would happen to the birds after that visit.

If you've never heard the story about the "Dixie Chicks", you won't recognize that those were *these* baby budgies. I took the next week off from work to care for these tiny birds as we started therapy to enable them to perch. Part of the therapy involved keeping them confined in paper cups (hence "Dixie" chicks) to keep their legs under their bodies. It involved around-the-clock care initially. After the first week, I even took them to work with me (it was convenient that I had a private office). They were happy, delightful little birds, but I don't know if I would ever recommend such intensive therapy again. Splay-legged birth defects are frequently associated with other birth defects, and it was unusual for birds to recover as well as these budgies did. However, a long-term inability to perch normally also contributes to significant health problems.

The outcome was that two of the budgies were able to perch and lived relatively normal lives for 10 years (they died within months of each other). The youngest was Peg o' My Heart - her story is way down the list on Mickaboo's [Tribute](#) page.



SH: Regarding your flock, you have an awesome aviary set up. Can you tell us about how that was designed and share some pictures for those who might be contemplating establishing their own aviary?

MY: Our aviary was the first one Nyla Copp designed and built. (Nyla has since moved to the Midwest, but she built several other aviaries in this area.) It is stainless steel wire (or "hardware cloth") on an aluminum frame, with polyester coated stainless window screen on the outside. All the hardware (screws, bolts, etc.) are stainless steel. It was originally built for our own birds to have an outside play area, but Mickaboo received a flock of 32 budgies from a shelter, so we put them in the aviary for what was supposed to be a short time. Several of the flock died immediately from what turned out to be polyoma, which is contagious and incurable. So, the budgies turned out to be permanent inhabitants.



Aviary budgie flock

Now, we cannot imagine what it would be like to **not** have an aviary full of budgies.

SH: Where do you see our organization going forward and what can we do to help get us there?

MY: **Right Now:** As I discussed with everyone at the Holiday Party, Mickaboo has been taking in more birds than we adopt out over the last two years. We cannot survive this situation in the long term. My challenge to the party attendees is that each and every one of them help Mickaboo **by finding somebody to adopt one bird, and then help that person get through our adoption process as quickly as possible.** If all 110 party attendees can give Mickaboo that gift this next year, we will come much closer to balancing our population - and not keep adding to the increasing number of unadopted birds in our foster homes. This is a challenge that I offer to **all** our volunteers and supporters: **Find a bird a forever home, and you will find that you have also given yourself a priceless gift.**



Jazzie, Michelle's Goffins enjoying the aviary

The Future: For our long-term future, one possibility is Mickaboo becoming a combination of rescue and sanctuary. A similar organization, Foster Parrots of Rhode Island, started like Mickaboo, as a rescue. Now they rescue birds, adopt out some, and provide sanctuary to others. For birds that are not able to find forever homes due to past abuse, health issues, or other conditions, this might be the appropriate solution.

It must be obvious to everyone that this scenario would require a substantial expansion of our organization. A sanctuary in which birds must be cared for 24/7 requires paid staff. Volunteers who help (and unpaid volunteers would still be absolutely critical, maybe even more critical) would be essential and would need to be involved in hands-on physical labor. And finally, we would need to find a permanent site outside the Bay Area's highly expensive real estate market. We have been offered property in the past by extremely generous supporters, but so far, the sites have not been suitable for what would essentially be an exotic bird aviary. (Think about the noise made by your own birds and multiply that by 50!)

Our most familiar example, the Oasis, is located miles from the nearest town and is also some distance from people who would complain about noise and odors, or be afraid of (imaginary but still scary) health impacts. The Rhode Island sanctuary occupies what was once a commercial chicken farm and slaughterhouse, ensuring that it is also separated from incompatible land uses. And we would need to own the land, or have it specifically held in trust for us in perpetuity. We could not risk losing the property and having nowhere to go for a large population of fragile birds.

SH: Final thoughts looking back on your own experiences with this organization on what it has meant to you personally to be a part of Mickaboo?

MY: Mickaboo has shown me what incredible levels of sacrifice, courage, and love that people are capable of to rescue innocent animals. Every time we find ourselves in difficulties, people have stepped up to help us solve them. When other changes and events in the world make me feel depressed, I look at our ever-changing, growing, evolving group of volunteers and realize that most of humanity is essentially good.

SH: Thank you Michelle, that is a great call to action for us. It is exciting to think of what the future could hold for Mickaboo. Your final thoughts are encouraging for all of us!