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Mick & the Founding of Mickaboo

An interview with Tammy

by Jonathan Harris

The passing of Mick the cockatiel last October 7 was a personal loss to his longtime companions, Tammy Azzaro and her family. It was also a milestone for Mickaboo - the last connection to its first bird, ironically falling in the 21st year since Tammy's relationship with the organization's namesake began. In 1988, when young Tammy Finnigan got a cockatiel for herself and as a companion for the one she had given her boyfriend, Bob Azzaro, she could not foresee her relationship with this small bird leading her to found and nurture one of the largest, most successful and respected bird rescue organizations around. Sometimes the smallest things in life prove to be the ones that change you most profoundly.



Tammy already had bought a cockatiel, "Birdy Boy," for Bob, who had prior experience with birds. Bob saw how taken she was with the young tiel, so he decided to buy one for her. He let her choose it at the pet store, and even then, her approach to that choice revealed a deepening concern for birds in need. Rather than a sweet, newly weaned bird, Tammy asked for an older one, a bird who hadn't been sold. She was led to a back room and shown a bunch of male cockatiels in an aviary. She said simply to catch the slowest one.

It was her first bird, and Mick was not quite what she expected. Birdy Boy had been tame from the start, being scarcely weaned when they got him. But Mick was an adult and had lived away from humans so long he was completely wild. He was scared and cage defensive. He would not step up and attacked Tammy's hand when she put it in his cage, biting and drawing blood. After a couple weeks of futile and painful confrontations, she seriously considered giving him back.

But then she realized that if she returned him, the little bird eventually would be purchased by someone else who in all likelihood would not treat him as well.

So, in the first of what would be many "if not me, then who?" moments, she kept Mick and redoubled her efforts to win him over. She didn't let the biting discourage her and continued to approach him. Once she took him away from the security of his cage he was much more agreeable to stepping up for her. Mick's hostility lessened and he let Tammy become his friend.

It soon became apparent that Mick was a mentally active bird of many skills and interests. He was playful—he especially loved getting into paper bags. He was a superb whistler and mimic. He imitated tunes, the sounds of other birds and other noises he'd hear, including all the ones on the "Avenger" key chain device. He also could imitate human words, an ability not unknown among cockatiels, but still somewhat rare.

From 1983–94, Tammy worked as a receptionist and Assistant Office Manager at a criminal defense attorneys' office in a rough San Francisco neighborhood. The lawyers were tough—one was a diehard hunter—and the clientele featured an array of drug dealers and other hardened criminals. Tammy often brought Mick to work, keeping his cage at her desk. She knew she could count on a few minutes of amusement, as she watched the parade of big, tough, and scary characters melt when confronted with the chatty little bird. Mick always had a talent for bringing out the happiness in others, she said, whether he was with people or other birds.

During this period, Tammy's relationship with Mick developed, and as it did, so did her concern for birds in general. She was led her to change her view of the world and her place in it. She 'fell in love,' as she puts it. As her understanding and appreciation of Mick deepened, she started paying closer attention to birds in other people's homes and began noticing things that concerned her in how they were kept and treated. She also became concerned about the unevenness of care and lack of knowledge about birds she saw among local veterinarians. She decided she wanted to work in animal care, and left the law firm in 1994.

By this time, she had discovered Bay Area Bird Hospital—one of the only real avian veterinary centers in the area then—and had begun working there part time with Dr. Lynn Dustin. Her experience at BABH reinforced her concerns about animal welfare, exposing her to many horrible cases of mistreatment and neglect; it also deepened her resolve to confront the problems at whatever level she could. At a personal level, that meant pursuing certification as a Registered Veterinary Technician, which she received in 2004.

It also meant something broader, at a community and institutional level. Tammy felt the problems in avian welfare had roots in many places: a lack of basic education about birds and bird care among owners, inadequate training among veterinarians, lack of proper shelter facilities for birds, and an almost complete lack of sanctuary organizations for rescuing and rehoming birds in need (at that time there was just one small group in the Bay Area).

While working at BABH, Tammy met a woman named Ellen, who had brought in her sick cockatiel, Aboo. She and Tammy became friends and shared their concerns about the welfare of

companion birds. Tammy had a dream of creating a non-profit organization specifically for birds—especially the "underdogs", the small, inexpensive species like cockatiels and budgies, that often were considered "throw-away birds." Ellen was enthusiastic about the idea, and Bob, whom Tammy describes as a 'doer,' pushed and encouraged them to make it a reality. So Tammy and Ellen founded Mickaboo, naming the organization after their two cockatiels. The new rescue group took in its first bird in 1996.

Tammy studied and learned about running a non-profit organization. She and other early volunteers scrounged for money any way they could. They held garage sales, sold the clothes off their backs (or at least their racks), even collected and sold aluminum cans. And they rescued and rehomed birds, developed classes, and eventually grew an organization with dozens of volunteers, rescuing and rehoming hundreds of birds each year, with an annual budget over \$100,000. The organization received its preliminary 501(c)3 designation in 1997 and final certification in 2002.

And what became of little Mick? It is fair to say he almost certainly had a better life than he would have if Tammy had returned him to the pet store! He lived in a large and growing flock, loved and admired by both his human and avian companions. He always remained a bit reserved, Tammy recalls, somewhat aloof from both humans and other birds. But he was the bird all the others respected and sought out, especially new birds joining the flock in later years.

He was not by nature a cuddly bird, but he had a keen intuition for when his affection mattered most. Tammy said that he always knew when she needed him. When her brother died, and then her grandmother, Mick stayed on her shoulder pressing his head into her cheek. "It just happened too many times to have been coincidence," she said.

Mick suffered from a variety of ailments. He had a heart murmur, and it was his heart which ultimately failed him. He developed arthritis in his old age, as well as cataracts, which left him practically blind. Yet he always would come out of his cage to greet Tammy when she came into the bird room.

Mick was at least 21, possibly older, when he died of heart failure at Bay Area Bird Hospital. He lived to see his namesake organization help thousands of birds, rescuing and rehoming everyone from parrots of all kinds to finches and canaries, to doves and pigeons, even ducks, roosters, quail, and other strangers who come our way. Mickaboo also helps countless others through counseling, education, and the occasional intervention. Mick was witness to and first citizen of a community—of people and birds, an entity which somehow sustains itself, even grows, though it is highly decentralized in its operation, and even a bit anarchic at times—not unlike a flock.

It is humbling to realize this little bird has brought so much good into the world.