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February 28, 2018

Investigator Michelle Reid fights for animals in the Lowcountry and beyond

A Valiant Defender



Palmetto Coast Media

Valiant animal rescue works to rehabilitate and rehome abused animals; oftentimes, care for these animals can exceed \$20,000 per case

It escalates quickly: A dog chained to a tree for hours in the blazing sun, an underfed horse with mangled mane and untrimmed hooves, a declawed cat left to fend for itself in the wild. It becomes crushing, stabbing, strangulation — ears cut off, ribs broken, jaws unhinged. Beyond inhumane, the crimes that local nonprofit Valiant Animal Rescue deals with are incomprehensible, and often eerily prescient. "Animal abuse is a stepping stone. Those people who have no empathy, it's extremely scary to see what they're capable of," says Michelle Reid.

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Reid, Valiant's executive director and professional animal cruelty investigator, has been fighting to protect animals and bring perpetrators to justice for more than a decade. She drives a forensics van and carries a .38, but she's no pretend cop. Reid has a Professional Animal Cruelty Investigator Certification from the University of Missouri and Vet Forensics Training from the University of Florida, plus numerous certifications from FEMA, and ASPCA training for investigating animal abuse for law enforcement.

Valiant is its own entity, but Reid does animal cruelty consulting and forensic work for local, state, and federal law enforcement in both the Carolinas, helping to prosecute criminals and rehabilitate and rehome abused animals. "We work with all sorts of animals but our focus is fighting animal cruelty," says Reid. "When I process animal crime scenes I collect that for prosecution to present in court. We have an animal crime lab in the Lowcountry, the only one well within the tri-state area. Everything is under lock and key 24/7. We can maintain chain of custody, and the lab where we process evidence has a large freezer and dry storage ... We're really big on people being held accountable."

Last year, based on Valiant's work, close to 50 people were put in jail; at the time of this interview (mid-January) there were six arrest warrants out for people based on Valiant cases.

In one case a few years back, Reid had taken ants off of an ax head and found the ants had canine DNA which linked the ax to being used on dogs — it turned out to be one of the largest animal cruelty cases in the history of South Carolina, with the removal of 45 live hounds and the remains of 200 more from a property in Goose Creek. In another case, Reid extracted a bullet from a dog that, when run through ballistics, was linked to a gun that had been used in murders. "What Valiant does is an asset to law enforcement," says Reid. "It has opened up a number of other cases."

While seeking justice and holding criminals accountable is important to Reid, the fate of the animals is always top priority. Throwing the bad guy behind bars is satisfying, of course, but when more than 100 dogs — many in terrible condition — are rescued from a large-scale commercial breeder, where do they go?

One of the most recent publicized seizures which Valiant was involved with was the removal of more than 130 toy breed dogs — and Siamese cats — from a breeder in Florence County in late November/early December 2017.



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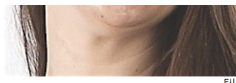
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Between Reid's van and a friend's truck, they were able to safely transport the animals to an undisclosed location. The large warehouse served as a temporary home and clinic for the dogs and cats, many of whom were "in bad shape." "It's triage," says Reid. "Now that everyone is safe, we have to get all the medical done." Once the dogs have been fixed, chipped, de-wormed, and more, Valiant seeks out fosters, who will care for the animals until they're ready for adoption. Like any large-scale venture, it takes a village.



One veteran foster mom, Sara Graves, took on more than three mother dogs and their babies at her home in West Ashley (she already has three dogs and a cat). This was the first time she'd worked with Valiant, and she was amazed at all that they do. "For the people that assisted them with this [the Florence County case] their worlds kind of stopped. I spend 45 minutes every morning cleaning crates and feeding animals — they did this 24/7 in the warehouse for 130 some odd dogs."

Brian Foster, publisher of *Lowcountry Dog* magazine, has worked closely with both Graves and Reid, serving as a bridge between foster dog parents and organizations like Valiant. Foster says that in the last eight or nine years, he's had probably 150 fosters stay with him. "He gets it," says Reid. "He cares about these animals. When it comes down to the dirty work, people don't want to do that. Brian has been involved with every aspect, cleaning up poop, making calls, fostering." Foster says that what Reid does, and in turn what the volunteers and Valiant employees do, is the side of rescue work that the public doesn't see, and the side most don't want to participate in.

"It's nothing for us to spend 20 or 40 grand with one of these cases," says Reid. "We were just talking today that with this group of animals, we've yet to hit a 48 hour period where we haven't had an emergency." Some of the Siamese cats rescued had feline AIDS, some of the tiny dogs had broken jaws, and some of the animals had to be euthanized. And all of the funds come from donations. "We need individuals and we need major donors," says Reid. "Funds will automatically enter into, 'can we save this animal's life?'"

Reid, who initially wanted to be a vet, knew that would never be enough for her sense of justice, and purpose. "I would save an animal out of a situation and then would see the same situation over and over. There hasn't been a how-to book on how to do this."

Many of the adult dogs and their puppies recently rescued from Florence are now up for adoption. The mothers, caged for years for the sole purpose of breeding, have slowly been learning how to interact with humans thanks to the hardwork and patience of fosters like Graves and Foster. The puppies are healthy, fixed, and ready for a new start. The funds that Valiant needs aren't just for these sweet pups, though. They're for every dog that's been mistreated, abandoned, abused. "It's so much easier to raise funds for the cute little puppy than the dead dog," says Reid. "And in our eyes dead or alive it doesn't matter, it deserves a voice. If it is deceased I will give the animal a voice so it doesn't die in vain."

Learn more about Valiant's work at valiantanimalrescue.org; make donations at paypal.me/valiantrescue. Valiant will host an Oyster Roast Sat. March 3 at Smoky Oak Taproom from 2 to 6 p.m. There will be live music, all-you-can-eat oysters, chili, wine and beer tastings, a raffle and auction items. Tickets are \$25 and can be purchased through the organization's Facebook page.

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