

Ghost Dogs: An Act of Dog Part II

by Donna Jackel

Batman and Mark, photo courtesy Mark Barone

Artist Mark Barone burned through his retirement savings for a mission he believed in. Now, he is hoping people who love animals as much as he does will step up to help him complete that dream.

Barone's life took an unexpected turn in 2011, when his partner, Marina Dervan, alerted him to the fact that approximately 5,500 dogs were killed in U.S. shelters every day. She obtained this information by contacting all the large U.S. humane societies and learning that between 4 and 6 million dogs were put down annually. "Since shelters do not have to report the number of animals killed, that was a best guess," she said. (According to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the numbers of animals euthanized in U.S. shelters has decreased from 2.6 million in 2011 to 1.5 million (670,000 dogs and 860,000 cats). The decline is partially due to an increase in the number of animals adopted and in strays being returned to their owners, according to the nonprofit.)

Stunned by these statistics, animal lover Barone decided to paint the portraits of 5,500 healthy dogs killed in shelters to illustrate how many lose their lives this way every day. "We thought it was extremely important to have a visual," he says.

Barone and Dervan created a nonprofit, An Act of Dog.

Barone was unprepared for the emotional, physical and financial toll of dedicating four years of his life to such a sad task. He only took breaks for each Thanksgiving and Christmas. For reference, he used photos sent to him by rescue group volunteers around the country of dogs they had not been able to save. While the painting schedule was grueling, the artist says the toughest part of the project was "having to look into [the dogs'] eyes and come to grips with the reality of them not being with us anymore and knowing how they needlessly suffered and had their lives taken away."

The hauntingly soulful 12X12-inch oil paintings reveal each dog's personality. They include the dog's name and the circumstances that led to its death. Barone also painted 11 8-foot-by-8-foot theme paintings, depicting such scenes as dog fights, animal testing and puppy mills.

"Although they were all individual souls, with different stories, I set out to tell one story about their collective ending," says Barone, an artist for more than 30 years whose work has been exhibited throughout America. "All of them have different reasons for ending up at the shelter—abandonment, surrender, their guardians died or had no money, etc., but it is [because of] our archaic and inhumane shelters that their lives were needlessly and inhumanely extinguished."

Needless to say, Barone is a proponent of no-kills shelters.

The next phase of An Act of Dog is the creation of a "Museum of Compassion" to display all 5,500 paintings. The museum would also have an educational component.

"The actual space needs to be at least 5,000 to 8,000 square feet so cost estimates would range from \$750,000 to \$1.6 million," says Barone. "We are open to having the museum in any city that will meet our needs and those of the philanthropist who steps up."

Meanwhile, Dervan and Barone continue to "plant seeds of compassion" by conducting art classes in schools around the country.

"Our purpose is to work with [schools] to develop and create an art program that focuses specifically on art for social change," says Barone, who lives in Sante Fe, New Mexico. "The students learn about the sad conditions and reality for shelter animals. After they research and discuss their findings, we work with them to create powerful art/woodcuts. Then we show them how to turn it into a product that can be used to raise money and awareness to save lives."

Half the money raised by the students' art projects supports the school district's art programs; the other half goes to animal welfare groups.

More people will learn about Barone when a documentary, "An Act of Dog," by Sagacity City Productions, premieres on PBS. It details his artistic journey. The film is in the final stages of postproduction, according to producer Bonnie Silva.

Whatever lies ahead, Barone says he is a better man for depicting the tragic ending of so many dogs.

"I care deeply for the voiceless and am committed to showing kids how to use themselves and their creativity towards creating a more compassionate world."

To join this Saturday's Awakin Call with Mark and Marina, RSVP [here](#).