

# Animal Rescue

**Most firefighters and EMTs don't have the training or equipment to save a pet. Veterinarian Janet Olson is changing that.**

By Leslie Goldman



When volunteer firefighter Mark Clark received a dispatch call alerting him that his house was on fire, he thought it was a cruel joke. As reality quickly set in, however, his thoughts flew to Bart, his 13-year-old German short-haired pointer, who was in the basement of his New Brighton, Minnesota, home. "I remember saying, 'You've got to tell the guys to let him out!'" Clark says. He arrived on the scene to find his coworkers huddled around Bart -- who had accompanied many of them on weekend hunting trips -- trying to revive him with human resuscitation equipment. "After about 15 minutes I told them to stop working," Clark says. "It was clear that there was no way to save Bart."

The loss was hard not just on Clark but also on his fellow firefighters, who worried they'd let their good friend down. And there was another person who felt their pain just as acutely: Janet Olson, the wife of one of the firefighters and a devoted animal lover, who was then in veterinary school. "Despite a tremendous amount of training and dedication, the firefighters felt helpless because they lacked the skills and equipment necessary to help a pet," Dr. Olson says. "I didn't want any rescuer to experience that again."

Dr. Olson finished up her veterinary degree and began to practice, but she never stopped thinking about what had happened to Bart. Eight years after his death she felt she was finally in a position to do something about it. So in 2004, armed with \$5,000 in start-up funds from the Minnesota Veterinary Medical Foundation, Olson created BART -- Basic Animal Rescue Training.

Funded by grants and donations and staffed mostly by volunteers, the nonprofit organization teaches firefighters, EMTs, paramedics, and police officers how to administer first aid and CPR to cats and dogs as well as how to handle larger animals in emergencies. In the past five years BART has certified more than 4,000 firefighters and other first responders, who have subsequently saved

the lives of many animals, to the relief of grateful owners.

BART instructors -- all vets, vet techs, or veterinary students -- teach animal-care basics (for instance, the best place to find a dog's pulse is along the inside of the back legs) and handling techniques. After the training, fire departments receive an emergency kit packed with gear such as cat- and dog-size oxygen masks, restraint and handling aids, reference materials, and contact information for local vet clinics.

Without BART, Smooch and Billie, Kathy Kosnoff's Siamese cats, might not be alive today. When a fast-moving fire broke out in the basement of her Minneapolis home three years ago, Kosnoff and her husband had just minutes to escape, leaving everything -- including the cats -- behind. Rescuers quickly found Billie, but Smooch was nowhere to be found. Finally a firefighter emerged carrying a laundry basket with an unresponsive cat inside. Kosnoff watched anxiously as the BART-trained firefighter put a tiny oxygen mask on Smooch and performed chest compressions with his fingers, bringing her cherished cat back to life.

Though the fire destroyed most of the family's possessions and they couldn't return home for a full year, Kosnoff still considers herself lucky. "If we'd lost Smooch and Billie the experience would have been much, much worse," she says. "Thanks to BART our whole family survived." Currently BART is in Minnesota and one fire department in Wisconsin, but Dr. Olson is working to introduce the training program to other states. Meanwhile, government officials have taken notice: The BART Basic Animal Life Support class for small animals has been approved by the Department of Homeland Security. Thanks to Dr. Olson and other volunteers, many more rescue workers will have the training to help pets, just as they do people.

Learning about the organization named for his dog was an emotional experience for Clark, who reflected on the times he himself had been unable to save a family's pet. "It was horrifying for them and for me," he says. "Thanks to Janet, firefighters now have the training to help prevent these tragedies."

"BART was something I had to do," says Dr. Olson, currently a veterinary cardiologist with her own consulting business. But the program's rewards have been greater than she anticipated. "I love being able to make an impact beyond my own practice," she says. One day when an animal saved by BART-trained personnel arrived at the hospital where Dr. Olson was a cardiology resident, the owner discovered that the program founder worked right down the hall. "She walked up to me and said, 'Thank you for helping save my pet,'" she says. "To see the gratitude in her face was just amazing."

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