

StarTribune BART story - 3/23/10

Saving man's best friends



By **Richard Sennott**, Star Tribune

Veterinarian Ann Burt talked about applying CPR to household pets during an animal rescue training session with Burnsville firefighters. The dog is a stuffed toy.

Firefighters learn animal CPR and rescue techniques in a training session in Burnsville.

By **ALYSSA FORD** Special to the Star Tribune

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When firefighters got the call, they knew the fire was at the house of one of their own.

Firefighter Mark Clark, the homeowner, radioed his colleagues with his No. 1 priority: To save Bart, his German shorthaired pointer.

The firefighters found Bart in the downstairs laundry room. The dog's nose was pointed toward the external dryer vent, but he was unconscious. Bart was carried outside, where firefighter Brian Olson and three colleagues asked each other what they should do.

"I tried to do some chest compressions, but I wasn't sure where his heart was," said Olson.

He got home that night, drained and depressed. He told his wife, veterinarian Janet Olson, that Bart had died, and that the firefighters were frustrated they couldn't do more to help.

That incident in 1996 in New Brighton stirred an idea in Janet Olson: To train firefighters and rescue workers to safely retrieve animals from burning buildings, and provide them basic emergency medical care, if time and resources allow.

She and one of her veterinary school teachers began by conducting an impromptu training session for the New Brighton Fire Department. And over the years, the idea has grown.

In 2004, the official Basic Animal Rescue Training program was formed. Since then, BART -- named for Clark's dog -- has trained 3,500 firefighters and emergency medical technicians in rescue techniques for animals in dangerous situations. It also has provided specialized animal rescue equipment to fire departments.

The training was on display recently at a session in Burnsville: Firefighters learned how to grab a frightened cat with a special tool called a "Snappy Snare." They got instruction on how to muzzle a dog, and how to use a rabies pole without hurting an animal. They also learned how to check an animal for a pulse and do animal CPR.

Cathy Neuenfeldt, Burnsville's emergency services director, said fires, gas leaks and medical emergencies are all situations where the training will help. While the safety of the first responders is the main reason for the training, leading the animals to safety is another major benefit.

"The techniques taught are actually quite simple," Neuenfeldt said, "but they aren't necessarily things you would think of when you're faced with an emergency. It is important to know how to approach an animal and how to restrain it."

Neuenfeldt said first responders will be equipped with simple restraints, including collars and leashes. A mesh bag can be used to control a cat.

"There also are instances where the first responder will be dealing with a larger or more difficult animal," Neuenfeldt said. "In a medical emergency a pet can be very protective of the person in need. In those instances a catch pole can be used to lead the animal away from the person needing attention.

"There really are multiple applications for this type of training."

The BART program has not yet gathered field data, but director Kim Barrett said anecdotal evidence shows it's working.

"All the time, we get rescue stories from Minnesota fire departments telling us how they used skills from the training to help save an animal," Barrett said.

Last month, Brian Olson had an occasion to use his training. On Valentine's Day at 2:30 a.m., he was called to a house fire in New Brighton. An electrical fire had started in the basement and was quickly engulfing the house.

Two cats, Oscar and Darth, were still inside. Firefighters carried both cats out in their arms. Darth was coughing and sneezing and suffered burns to his ears and eyelashes.

Oscar -- a fat, friendly gray cat -- wasn't so fortunate. Once outside, Olson checked the cat's gums for capillary pressure, then felt for a pulse where the cat's back legs met his body. He used a specially designed mask to give Oscar oxygen. When that didn't help, he started chest compressions with his hand around the cat's rib cage.

Despite Olson's best efforts, Oscar didn't make it. "The cat still died," said Olson. "But at least I could tell the family that I really did everything I could."

Alyssa Ford is a Minneapolis freelance writer. Staff writer Dean Spiros contributed to this story.



Captain Bill D'Agostino of the Burnsville Fire Department performed CPR on a dog mannequin during a training session at the Fairview Ridges Education Center.



Burnsville firefighter and paramedic Andy Hamlin listened to the heartbeat of a giant schnauzer during a training session. Photos by **Richard Sennott**, Star Tribune

Kim Barrett of BART showed a proper grasp of a cat using a stuffed toy.

