



Zero's previous owners abandoned him at the gate of Best Friends Animal Sanctuary, leaving him to fend for himself in an environment teeming with predators and extreme temperatures. Lucky for him, he's recently been adopted by Dogtown co-manager John Garcia and his wife, MacKenzie.

BEST *of* friends

Michael Vick's dogs found their way to the world's largest no-kill shelter, right in the heart of Utah at **Best Friends Animal Sanctuary**.

BY JEREMY PUGH
PHOTOS BY GRACE CHON

John Garcia is in a tough spot.

He's walking down a hall to a quarantined area in a cinder-blocked kennel in Surrey County, Virginia. He has the weight of the criminal justice system of Virginia and the spotlight of a nation of rabid football fans watching Michael Vick's fall from glory on his shoulders. And then there are the baying and snarling pit bulls, waiting for him at the end of the echoing hallway.

Michael Vick's dogs.

Those ones. Those terrifying, slavering piles of muscle and bone and teeth, trained to kill, to maim and brutalize their brothers in the underworld sport of dog fighting.

Yeah. Tough spot.

He's here amid the growls and barks and TV crews waiting outside, the black-robed judge at the courthouse and a whole world of dog lovers and redneck football fanatics

wondering how it'll all shake out. He's got to decide how many of these violent, trained killers he can save. And his answer? All of them.

Two-thousand miles and three years from that moment, I'm in Garcia's office at the Best Friends Animal Sanctuary, outside of Kanab, Utah, asking him to recount those tense days in Virginia. The moon-faced, always-smiling 29-year-old is choking up with pride as he tells me about how all of them, all 48 supposedly deadly dogs, made it out of the hell that was their lives on Vick's compound.

"Dogs. All dogs," he begins, "they live in the moment. They live to please us. They are truly man's best friend. The dogs in this case weren't the problem; the people who they were trying to please were. We got them out of there. Taught them love and put them in our pack

here and they have forgotten that terrible place they were in.”

Garcia is the co-manager of Dogtown, the canine section of a sprawling 3,000-acre spread up Angel Canyon outside of Kanab that is the world’s largest no-kill animal sanctuary and a place of peace and serenity in a world filled with oil spills, wars and chaos. Here, in this rugged place in Utah’s color country, it’s all about responsibility for these creatures. It’s a beatific mission seeking to fulfill our role as the benevolent caretakers for all creatures great and small.

FLAGSHIP FOR A MOVEMENT

Best Friends was founded in 1984 by a small group of like-minded individuals from California who bought the arid acreage and built it brick-by-brick into the lovingly landscaped desert oasis it is today. Best Friends is nice, really nice. It’s like an Amangiri resort for domestic animals. I had pictured the place as an overrun cacophony of dogs and cats, horses and pigs, parrots and rabbits, rescued by hippy-dippy types from California, who had no real plan for how to deal with their good intentions.

Nope. That, what I described just there, would be what Garcia would call “a hoarding situation,” and Best Friends cleans up hundreds of hoarding situations every year. Hoarding among staffers and volunteers is a no-no. Garcia himself only has two dogs and a cat at his house in Fredonia, Ariz., just over the border from Kanab. The dogs at Dogtown are quite enough. This place is the opposite of a hoarding situation. The sanctuary only takes in animals it can legitimately care for, despite hundreds of pleas every day. Learning to say “no” is a big part of animal rescue.

And, with its eco-friendly buildings, immaculate animal enclosures, clever signage

Since its inception in 2000, Utah’s **No More Homeless Pets** campaign has decreased the state’s euthanasia rates by 54% and increased adoptions by 42%.



The Gray Garden
WENDY HATCHELL will not shut up. No questions, no prompting, she just launches into anything and everything you’d need to know about psittacines, otherwise known as parrots, cockatoos and pretty much any bird that can outlive you and me. Like her, her birds don’t shut up, either.

“People get these birds without thinking,” she says. “A cockatoo or an African parrot can live to be 80 or 90 years old. That’s a real commitment. So many of the birds we have here are here because people just didn’t think before getting into a relationship that long. It’s like a marriage and, well, you know how many marriages fail, right?”

Hatchell is saying this amid a screeching cacophony of psittacines that clamor for our at-

tention. There’s a jug of earplugs on the wall, but I resist so I can make out every third word of what she’s saying.

And what she’s saying, despite the cacophony, is that people need to know how intelligent these birds are, how loyal, but, also, what a chore and headache they can be if you don’t know what you’re doing. So, basically, don’t buy a cockatoo without talking to Wendy Hatchell first.

“These birds are for life,” she says amid the shrieks of her charges. “You see the cockatoo in the bird show and think, ‘Oh I’d like to have one of those,’ but you can’t just shove them in a cage, leave for work and come home and expect a nice bird that can talk. You have to work with them, every day and know what you’re doing.”

Volunteers report first to Best Friend’s Welcome Center, left. Parrot Garden manager Wendy Hatchell, shown above with Shwimpy, likens her job to “working at a large preschool full of kids with ADD.”



Volunteers start their day walking dogs like Squiggy, above, and later will tackle more heavy-duty chores. Jackson, far left, waits patiently for a treat in his indoor/outdoor kennel; Keeley Floyd, middle, a vet tech at Dogtown Heights, has eight to 12 dogs in her care at any given time, and here gives love to a six-month-old Lab mix named Jellybean who has a mild heart condition. Dog I.D. badges and collars, left, await dogs eager for outdoor play time.



Clockwise from left: Part of the five square miles of Horse Haven pastures where horses, burros and goats mingle; Gary Yale and his daughter Rebecca have made the yearly sojourn to Best Friends to volunteer since she was 12 years old, this time in Puppy Preschool with puppy Trip; Pot-bellied pig Sprocket was a poorly planned Christmas gift for a St. George family who were told he'd grow to only 50 lbs. Now weighing in at 130 lbs, Sprocket is the king of volunteer sleepovers.

CAMPAIGNS FOR CHANGE

Best Friends Animal Society has several animal advocacy programs across the country, but their support of the **No More Homeless Pets** campaign is one of the largest. Here are four initiatives designed to help attain that goal.

First Home Forever Home

Puppies and kittens are irresistible, but many are abandoned each year for easily remedied reasons such as obedience training. This program helps to provide information and training pet owners need to help keep these animals out of shelters across the country.

Puppies Aren't Products

'Adopt, Don't Shop' is an all-important message when it comes to ending the inhumane practice of puppy breeding on a factory scale. Best Friends encourages peaceful demonstrations at pet stores selling these puppies and advocates for legislative changes to close puppy mills.

Saving America's Dogs

The Bull Terrier has gone from being a beloved family dog (remember Spuds MacKenzie?) to one of the most vilified breeds in history. But it is often people and not dogs who are to blame for the breed's bad reputation. In 2008, Best Friends rehabbed Michael Vick's dogs, and many have been adopted.

Focus On Felines

Best Friends has always been an advocate for stray and feral cats. Their TNR (Trap/Neuter/Return) program helps control the cat population and works with local shelters and non-profits to prevent cats and kittens from entering the system in the first place.



and well-groomed roads all situated in a stunning desert landscape, it's a mecca for animal lovers from all over the world who visit by the thousands to volunteer. This is the flagship of a movement, a shiny, well-kept first line of a larger plan to put an end to kill shelters, puppy mills, backyard potbelly pig breeders, rainforest bird poachers and notions that these creatures among us are less than us in some way. The Buddha would love it. Jesus would love it. Whichever many-armed-Hindu god looks after animals (Vishnu?) would love it. Mohammed? He'd be down. Hell. I love it, and I'm a heathen cat person.

Garcia's office in the well-air-conditioned building with dogs baying and barking around the baseball-diamond-sized runs outside is a case in point, designed with the comfort of dogs in mind. The sanctuary's founders celebrated their 25th anniversary last year, and Garcia has seen 12 of those years himself. He came to work here when he was 17 years old, and he literally worked his way up from the bottom.

"My first job at Dogtown was hauling dog poop to the dump," he laughs.

He grew up in neighboring Fredonia, as "the only fat kid with the last name Garcia." In the rural, Mormon community, his dog Sprocket was his best friend, and the boy-and-his-dog-against-the-world ethos he learned in those days has made Garcia the man he is now. The man that was able to walk into that animal shelter in Virginia and know what he was dealing with.

"These dogs were scary," he says, grinning before his next sentence. "They were scary to someone who didn't know what he was dealing with. I had not one ounce of fear walking in there. There is a difference between animal aggression and human aggression. People think that if a dog is a fighter he's aggressive toward humans. But he's not. He's aggressive toward other dogs. These dogs were under-socialized. They didn't know what to do with humans, so they exhibited typical dog behavior. They were scared. They were just scared. That's what I saw. And if they're scared of you, they'll try to scare you."

THE FACE OF DOGTOWN

Oh yeah. BTW. Garcia is a star. He's the main figure in National Geographic Channel's Dogtown series, a reality show about the sanctuary that concluded its fourth season earlier this year. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, he went to Mississippi and spent nine months helping rescue the dogs, cats and all type of creatures left high and dry by the collapse of the levees in New Orleans. He's demure and all, "just-part-of-the-team," but like it or not, he's the face of Best Friends to millions of people around the world. He's even been on *Oprah*. And when it comes

Even Oprah is on the Best Friends bandwagon, naming it one of *O Magazine's* 12 favorite charities.



Ending 'Pignorance'

YVONNE MACINTOSH visited the sanctuary in 2001 on a trip from Hackensack, New Jersey. She returned, sold her auto-body business and told her husband that she was moving to Kanab with or without him.

"It's a good thing he came," she says, "I don't know anyone else who would ever understand me like he does, and Kanab isn't exactly the place you meet your future husband."

MacIntosh's goal, like many of the visiting volunteers who come to Best Friends, was to work with the cute little puppies in Dogtown. Then she fell in love with a pig. Wilbur was

his name, of course.

"People have 'pignorance'," she says, sharing her favorite coined term. "Pigs are as smart as dogs, as interesting as cats and, well, let's just say I don't eat pork anymore and, once you get to know these guys, neither will you. You don't eat dogs or cats, do you? Well, it's the same thing."

She is saying this as Jack, a young razorback, who has just rolled in the mud, smears my pants with a bright swath of red-rock earth.

"That's a souvenir," she says, laughing. "I can tell you from experience that that won't wash out."



GARY KALPAKOFF

WHAT HAPPENED TO MICHAEL VICK'S FIGHTING DOGS?

Out of the 48 dogs seized at Vick's fighting compound, 26 were adopted out to homes immediately. Only 22 of the most behaviorally difficult dogs returned to the sanctuary. Of these 22, one died because of a medical problem, 19 are in the process of being adopted out, and two were court-ordered to spend their lives at the sanctuary, where they are an integral part of the training methods used by staff members like John Garcia, left, with Vick's former dog Georgia.

down to Michael Vick or, even, a force of nature like Katrina, he’s never brought any judgment to bear on a football player he doesn’t know or the Almighty for sending the flood.

“I’m a very in-the-moment person. If I have no control over something, I say, ‘Let’s fix it; what’s the solution?’” he tells me. “We were at day one with these dogs. I didn’t worry about what happened before to them. To me there was no Michael Vick, no hurricane. That was the past. I said, ‘We’re going to take good care of you starting now.’ I believe that dogs teach humans. I’ve met a lot of dogs that have been through emotional and physical trauma humans wouldn’t be able to even talk about. And here they are still looking for love and guidance from us. I’ve met humans who get traumatized on their way to work, and we’re supposed to be the top of the food chain.”

Garcia is most definitely a glass-half-full kind of guy. He’s a worker, on the front lines of a movement to redefine the way we all think of animals. I ask him, though, how a place like Best Friends can be justified, all this effort, infrastructure and willpower brought to bear, when there are starving and homeless people among us.

“The way I look at it is that animals don’t have the ability to choose what their life is,” he says. “Humans do. I feel like I owe dogs for the life I have and the way they’ve shown me how to be kind and nice. And our animals help people, they bring joy and life to their adopted parents, we train service and search dogs that save lives, and we’re all animals, really. By helping each other, we help teach one another to be kinder. You can learn a lot from a dog. Trust me. I’m living proof.”

Done with my karmic talk with Garcia, I look through my notes on a shady bench near the gravel road outside the Cat World headquarters in the late-afternoon desert heat and quiet. A woman walks by with a stroller. I think, “Oh she’s brought her baby out here to see the kitty-cats” but then a feline sneeze erupts from the bassinet. Ah. That tracks.

I’m at Best Friends, after all. Where animals and their care are paramount. Putting a cat in a pram for a stroll is nothing compared to the things I’ve seen these two days in the land where the animal kingdom of

“We were at day one with these dogs. I didn’t worry about what happened before to them. To me there was no Michael Vick, no hurricane. That was the past. I said, ‘We’re going to take good care of you starting now.’”

How You Can Make a Difference

There are dozens of ways you can help the Best Friends Animal Society fulfill their No More Homeless Pets mission (yes, you can adopt a homeless shelter pet, but there’s more). Even if a visit to Kanab isn’t in the stars, here’s what you can do in your neck of the woods.

Spay or neuter local strays by visiting pets911.com for listings of low or no-cost spay and neuter services in your area. The “Pets in Utah” license plate costs only \$25; all proceeds go toward the No More Homeless Pets initiative to help end the euthanasia of homeless dogs and cats statewide. Visit nomorehomelesspets.org

The Big Fix Tour is a mobile clinic offering pet health services along with spaying and neutering. Check utahpets.org to see when the clinic will be in your neighborhood.

The Furburbia Adoption Center is part of No More Homeless Pets in Utah. Walk, play and teach dogs basic commands, and pet, clean and keep the cats cozy. 6699 N. Landmark Drive, Ste B-103, Park City, foautah.org

The Rescue and Rehab Ranch needs volunteers to help clean horses, tack and stalls, and also needs help turning out horses. 6466 N. High View Road, Peoa, foautah.org

Temporary foster homes put homeless animals in transitional housing for 10 days to two months. Keep the animals as long as you can to ensure their good health and adoptability. Contact the Humane Society of Utah for more information. utahhumane.org

Walk and care for dogs and kitties at the Humane Society of Utah. It’s looking for individuals to help with dog walking, dog grooming and cat grooming/socialization. 4242 S. 300 West, SLC, utahhumane.org

your biology class is taken literally and humans are just as much a part of the taxonomy as a red-tailed hawk.

HELPING HUMANS, TOO

Best Friends draws thousand of volunteers each year who spend their two-week vacation in a place where to be kind to animals is holy writ. The animals here, in a way, are the salvation of the humans who come to this island of misfit toys to care for creatures redeemed from cruelty at human hands. They give new life to the people who come seeking solutions and, even, absolution. Perhaps they come because it gives them a purpose and results easily seen in a world where more and more, the problems of our kind, from the top of the food chain, seem insurmountable and beyond hope. The cause of helping a puppy, kitten, pig, or parrot is a simple equation that draws on the deep well of compassion we all hold. It’s an easy kindness without the messiness of human problems, and out here, they’re with fellow humans, brothers and sisters, who believe the same—that all creatures are worth loving.

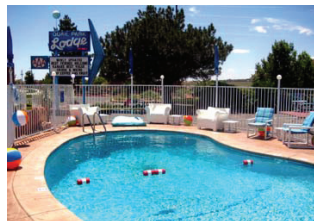
It’s the ultimate and literal case of birds of a feather flocking together. This is a paradise for those seeking peace, a calming place, a summer camp without bullies, a retreat where all of their bottled up love can find an outlet, and tenderness is not scorned. There is a place for us all, from the lowliest parakeet to the most hurting human, and it lies in the desert outside of Kanab, up Angel Canyon. [SL](#)

GOING TO KANAB? HERE’S THE 411...



WHERE TO STAY XBARH LODGE

Situated on 75 acres just 20 minutes north of the animal sanctuary, guests at the **XbarH Lodge** are immersed in a tranquil desert skyline you won’t find in downtown Kanab. Stay in the main lodge and mingle with other travelers in the communal kitchen or rent a separate three-bed, two-bath cabin with its own campfire pit. XbarH owners Michelle and JC Lobkovich pride themselves on providing guests every comfort of home, including full laundry facilities, satellite TV and wireless Internet. As Michelle says, “I like fresh flowers on my dining room table, why wouldn’t my guests?” Pets welcome. 708 Red Rock Drive, Orderville, 435-648-2750, xbarhlodge.com



WHERE TO STAY QUAIL PARK LODGE

The Xbar is best suited for longer stays, really, so if you’re just in for a night, check out the **Quail Park Lodge**. The playful retro motel fills the kitsch factor outside, while inside (surprise!) you’ll find tricked-out rooms, featuring triple-sheeted beds, plush comfy mattresses, cozy comforters, four pillows per bed (soft and firm), so you can enjoy the nostalgia and actually get some sleep. Bonus: They rent out cruiser bikes for exploring blessedly flat Kanab. 125 N. 300 West, Kanab, 435-215-1447, quailparklodge.com



WHERE TO EAT ROCKING V CAFE

Go to a small town and you usually lower your dining expectations. No need at Kanab’s **Rocking V Cafe**. Being “sustainable sourcers” of ingredients isn’t due to the latest food trend but because the Rocking V’s locale creates true dependence on local produce and ingredients. Give the hand-cut buffalo tenderloin with burgundy balsamic reduction a try or go for the veg-friendly Red Canyon polenta cakes topped with a green chile-tomatillo sauce that is especially tasty and filling. Al fresco patio dining is available for you and your dog (or pig!), complete with Scooby snacks. 97 W. Center St., Kanab, 435-644-8001, rockingvcafe.com



WHAT NOT TO MISS MOQUI CAVE

Signs on Highway 89 will trumpet this roadside attraction just north of Kanab. A former bar and dance hall inside a giant eroded pocket of sandstone, **Moqui Cave** is now a life’s-calling for the son (Lex) of Grant Chamberlain, a former Pittsburgh Steeler, blue-ribbon wood carver (don’t miss the Ronald Reagan bas relief) and, as his portrait in the entryway proclaims, holder of the Indian name “Chief Many Talents.” The cave is a goofy mishmash of western oddities, cool rocks Lex’s father found in his lifetime and a weird tribute to the life and times of one of Utah’s most eclectic sons. Don’t miss Lex’s personal tale of the cave. He repeats it to all who will listen, all day. 4518 N. Highway 89, 435-644-8525, moquicave.com



Best Friends’ Adoptions Manager Kristi Littrell, left, visits one of the cats available for adoption at Cat World, where felines roam together free of cages.



This issue’s mission: Find Jackson a Forever Home.

Once we nuzzled with this special boy he quickly became our adoption project.

Contact bfas.org for more info on how to give him a real home.