



A SECOND CHANCE

Donna Costley's Wilton-based rescue group is about more than saving birds

By David Allen Brown

onna Costley saves parrots. And in a very real way, the 35 parrots she cares for on her five-acre sanctuary in Wilton save her. Costley operates Second Chance Bird Rescue out of her home and of the 35 birds she has inside and outside of her sprawling ranch home, 12 of them cannot be adopted. But each one of the Amazons, cockatoos, conures and macaws she cares for also care for her as she continues to process her grief.

In 2012, her son Christopher Schmidt, wife Diana, and their three young children were killed in a fiery vehicle crash in Nebraska while moving back to California from Washington, D.C. The grief for the mother of six was unbearable. She retired early from a Veterans' Administration job in Fairfield in 2014 and then moved to Wilton with her husband, Gary, on a parcel large enough to accommodate the birds, and a remembrance garden for her family members she lost in the crash.

"(The birds) are therapy for me," Costley said on a blazing June afternoon as she showed a couple of visitors her menagerie that also includes dogs, cats, chickens, goats, a turtle and peacocks. "My doctor told me it was either work or my health. I chose to retire."

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Her full-time job now is caring for the animals and fielding prospective adoptive owners for the parrots. Because many of the parrots she has were abused, Costley is careful in selecting whom to allow to adopt. She performs a home inspection to make sure the birds will be healthy and safe in their new environment and coaches the new parrot parents on what can be toxic to parrots, such as the use of Teflon-coated cookware, incense and candles.

At her Wilton sanctuary, the more delicate birds are kept in large and well-appointed cages in a three-car garage. The larger parrots are kept in one of 12 10-foot-by-10-foot outdoor aviaries that were originally meant to be dog kennels. The aviaries have roofs and floors made of stepping stones to protect the birds from diseases found in the soil, as well as making daily cleaning a lot easier, Costley said.

Each morning, Costley rises and begins the hours-long process of cutting fruits and vegetables and combining the meals with specially formulated feed pellets and nuts for each of the parrots. Before feeding time she cleans and maintains each cage, then makes sure the parrots have fresh water and finally delivers the munchies.

"I go through \$600 a month in feed bills," said Costley, whose Second Chance Bird Rescue operates as a non-profit. "I spent \$200 just this week in walnuts."

But the birds seem to appreciate the effort and expense. They all perk up as Costley makes her way through the lines of cages. She talks to each one and calls to them by name. Some have featherless bodies from neurotically tearing out their plumage. Others flinch or hiss at visitors, still traumatized from past owners who, for example, taped them up with duct tape and used them as footballs. That's just one of the terrible stories Costley relates to visitors. But the most



common reason for surrenders is owners passing away and the family members either not able to or willing to care for birds that can live into their 60s.

The oldest bird Costley has is a 42-yearold Moluccan cockatoo named Hoagie. There's also a pair of blue-front conures

named Amigo and Joey who Costley estimates are at least 30. She affectionately calls them her "grumpy old men."

Before Costley rescued parrots she started fostering some birds with the intent to just keep a few. But she fell in love with her first foster bird, Princess, a peach-colored Moluccan cockatoo, and decided to keep her. It was a "foster failure," Costley joked. Princess will enjoy the rest of her life in a huge cage with plenty of food, toys and love.

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Costley's first rescue came in 2008 when she found a want ad on Craigslist from a couple in Lodi who had a Moluccan macaw kept in a dog crate. They weren't necessarily abusing the bird, Costley said, but were just uneducated about the needs of the highly social and often noisy birds.

Last year was Costley's busiest in terms of rescues, with 20 birds taking up residence in Wilton. She's on pace to eclipse that mark, with 13 rescues six months into 2015.

"I don't need more rescues, I need more donations,"
Costley said. Costley is getting the word out, not only
about her parrot rescue services, but the need to support
the non-profit, much like people support the SPCA. On
the third Sunday of every month Costley and a select few
parrots will set up in front of the Pet Smart in Elk Grove.
Costley will hand out literature and business cards, give free
consultations and advise guests to not buy from breeders.

"They're just like puppy mills because these beautiful parrots can be as much as \$12,000," Costley said. "I know, because I bought a blue Hyacinth macaw for that much. That's why I named him Chase – after the bank."

From time to time Costley and her parrots are invited to set up in front of the Tractor Supply store in Galt. That's where Christine Mitchell and her family saw Costley with a couple of birds. The Galt resident said she once had an eclectus parrot in her early 20s, but went off to the military and was forced to sell her.

"I had one with a bright red head and a blue chest and just adored her and she loved me back," Mitchell said. "I really wanted another one but didn't have \$2,000 or so to spend. So when we saw Donna in front of Tractor Supply, I asked if she had an eclectus, and she did."

Ruby had been surrendered a year earlier after her male owner died and her female owner was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. The adoption went through without a hitch after a home visit from Costley and a visit by the

Mitchells to Costley's home in Wilton. Mitchell said Ruby is adjusting nicely to her new home and family members.

"She's doing great and starting to talk again," said Mitchell, who has cared for Ruby for a month now. "She says 'hello,' 'peek-a-boo' and makes cat calls. More words are starting to come out as she feels more safe and she's getting used to riding around on the shoulders of my girls (ages 6 and 12). She especially likes it when my parents come over to visit because I think she identifies with them because they're older, like her former owners."

Mitchell said she spent \$200 for Ruby's adoption and spent another \$50 for the cage Ruby had been in for much of her life. That helped the move and transition go a lot smoother, she said, as all of her toys and perches also made the move.



Ruby's adoption warms Costley's heart. It also made room for another rescue bird, one that she'll love on and one that will also rescue her as she continues to cope with the tragic loss of loved ones.

Staying busy is a good way to deal with grief and Costley definitely stays busy tending her flock. She knows her efforts pay off. Her good deeds honor those she lost.

Box information: For more information about Second Chance Bird Rescue call (916) 956-2153 or email Bordend@sbcglobal.net.