

Beyond The Law: Meris Bickford

Interview and photos
by Daniel J. Murphy

Adjacent to the federal courthouse in Portland sits an intricately carved fountain that contains an inscription from Shakespeare: “Sweet mercy is nobility’s true badge.” The large granite structure – a drinking trough for horses – was dedicated to Stanley Thomas Pullen, a past president of the Maine State Society for the Protection of Animals (MSSPA). Although the fountain might appear to be a relic from the age of horse and buggy, the work of the MSSPA carries on in the present century. The Society serves as shelter for dozens of mistreated and abandoned animals, helping them return to health and providing a safe home for the remainder of their days. Meris Bickford, current president of the MSSPA (and former president of the Maine State Bar Association), sat down with the *Maine Bar Journal* to discuss her work with these animals.



MBJ: Please tell our readers about your work with animals.

MB: I serve as Chief Executive Officer at the Maine State Society for the Protection of Animals, but what I really do is some of everything. It means that some days I come to work and the first thing I do is clean stalls and make up feed buckets, other times it means that the first thing that I do is go to Augusta and appear before a legislative committee. Still other times, it means that I'll be preparing for trial work and going to a court somewhere in the State of Maine and putting on a case.

MBJ: How would you describe the work of the Maine State Society for the Protection of Animals?

MB: Well, it's helpful to think of it as New England's largest horse shelter. That's really what it is. It isn't an enforcement agency. It has no ability to enforce Maine's animal cruelty laws or investigate them. Those functions are left to Maine's Department of Agriculture and the local animal control officers. Those are the two entities that investigate and enforce animal cruelty laws. What happens here at the Society is that after the State has elected to remove large animals like horses, cattle, goats, or other farm animals from people who may be abusing or neglecting them, the animals have to go somewhere. The State of Maine does not operate any animal shelters itself; most animal sheltering in Maine is done by non-profits. The Society is a 501(c)(3) public charity and its mission simply is to take in those farm animals – primarily, horses – that the State has removed from abusive circumstances and rehabilitate them. Then, when the

animals are able to be placed in the community, we facilitate their adoption into private homes.

MBJ: When did the Society get started?

MB: The Society was actually founded in the City of Portland in 1872. The mission then was to provide retirement care for the horses that pulled the streetcars and the fire engines in the city. The Society has deep roots here in Cumberland County. With



the advent of the gasoline engine, the mission changed because there weren't many horses to care for. However, in 1974, the organization was revitalized. It moved from its prior location on Exchange Street in Portland, to its farm location at 279 River Road in Windham, where it is today. At that time, it began a collaborative with the State of Maine Department of Agriculture to carry out its present day mission.

MBJ: How many horses are under the Society's care right now?

MB: That's a great question. The census can change daily, which is a good thing. In the six years or so that I have been here, the all-time high was about 90 horses. Today I believe the barn population is somewhere around 64 horses.

MBJ: What are some of the key drivers that give rise for the need for the protection of animals by the Society and other care providers?

MB: If only we knew the answer to that. I think that the tough global economic circumstances have translated into greater opportunities for not just horses, but all animals, to experience abuse or neglect. People may have to choose between providing for their children or providing for their animals. That, of course, is very difficult. I believe difficult economic circumstances for people generally mean worse circumstances for animals. That is really only part of the answer. The other part that we don't fully understand why some people feel a need to control children or women, or abuse their partners. It seems obvious that there's some psychological component in the dynamic of those who choose to deliberately deprive vulnerable animals of what they need – food, water, shelter – those kinds of basic needs. If we knew what motivated people to do such things we'd probably be better at detecting and preventing that abuse.

MBJ: For an average horse, what are the economics for the items that are needed on a daily basis?

MB: Well, if you're going to own a horse, it is good to know that they are a one-way street when it comes to money. Very few people ever are able to devise a business plan using horses

that actually makes money. Horses are a very expensive recreational pursuit or hobby for all but a very few people. Here in Maine, if you're going to keep a horse, we encourage you to budget at a minimum \$3,000 a year for feed, hay, veterinarian services, routine vaccinations and well care for a horse. In addition, horses require regular dental work. Their teeth continue to grow over the course of their lifetime and must be floated, filed down, on a periodic basis. And then horses, like many hooved animals, also require foot care. Generally, every six to eight weeks, you'll need to have the farrier, or blacksmith, come and trim your horse's feet. If your horse is in regular work or has hoof problems, shoes may be required and that is more expensive than a barefoot horse.

MBJ: How much does it cost to feed a horse each day?

MB: Lawyerly answer: it depends! Here we budget about a bale of hay per day per horse. Obviously really large horses might eat a little more than that, and smaller animals may not be consuming a full bale. It depends on the animal's level of performance or activity. For example, horses that are racing or performing at a high level in the competition or entertainment world are likely to need processed feed in greater volume. At the Society the average horse is probably getting six to eight quarts of processed feed a day and somewhere between three-quarters to one full bale of hay, plus



supplements like vitamins, minerals or probiotics. In general we budget about \$5.00 a bale, but the price of hay is very unpredictable. Hay is a weather-dependent crop and its price is also affected by the cost of the fuel used by the hay-making equipment.

MBJ: How did you become interested in animals?

MB: I like to tell people that I was born neighing. As a child, all that I thought about for as long as I could remember was having a horse of my own. My first horse was a gift from my parents on my ninth birthday. They gave me a retired Standardbred racehorse right off the track.

Both of my parents were animal lovers and it was a value that they cultivated in all of their children. Growing up, it was a rule in my family that animals ate before people. For example, on a Saturday when we wanted to get up late, hang around and watch cartoons, that didn't happen until we went to the barn and did morning chores. The rule was the same for all of the cats, dogs, rabbits, and other animals that we kept in the house. Early on I learned that domestic animals really require more work than many people would like to think.



MBJ: What is it about working with animals that gives you satisfaction?

MB: I often get that question when I visit schools and service clubs, promoting the Society and animal welfare. Sometimes I combine that answer with the one about why I went to law school. Working with animals, like working with children or other vulnerable populations, is very rewarding. If you are able to care for yourself and then some, I believe you have an obligation to use that excess capacity for the benefit of others. As a neophyte attorney I worked in the Human Services Division of the Attorney General's Office prosecuting child welfare cases. I loved the kids; I didn't love the cases. At the end of the day, whether it is helping disadvantaged kids or abused animals, you can sit down with them one-on-one and really feel as though you have done something meaningful.

MBJ: Any intersection between your legal work and your pastime?

MB: Absolutely. The first couple of years that I worked here with the MSSPA, I had a lot of cases that were in litigation. Right now I think we have one group of seized animals that were placed with us and they are subject of a prosecution. So, yes there is quite a lot of opportunity to do trial and legal work here. When an organization like the Society is providing care for animals that are the subject of prosecution by the State, the care provider is entitled to enforce a lien against the owner of the animals for the cost of the animals' care. When the animal cruelty case is brought against the owner, I participate on behalf of the Society as a party.

MBJ: What's the best advice you've ever received?

MB: The best advice that I've ever received, and I try – not always successfully – to internalize every day, is that you should accept the gift of working at something that matters and something that you love. I first received this advice from my mother, who also had the habit of saying about anything difficult, "let it be a challenge." A lot



of people have given me this advice in different ways. Most recently I heard it at a Lyle Lovett concert when Lyle himself stood on stage, thanked the audience and said that it was a gift to do what you love.

For practicing lawyers who are wondering if that is really all there is, I invite them or anyone who needs additional challenges in their life: get involved with a non-profit organization, like the Maine State Society for the Protection of Animals. It's unbelievably satisfying to achieve success for something that really matters, that you really do love. It's pretty fabulous.

MBJ: How can people help the MSSPA?

MB: The best thing, of course, that people can do is to know about the organization and its work, and then share that information with anyone who is open to the message. You can like us on Facebook. Also, visit the farm. The Society is open to the public every day, including weekends, holidays, even Christmas. There's an unspoken message in that. We like people to recognize that animals need care every day, so we are open every day and available

for people to enjoy the animals. We have a robust volunteer program. And finally, because the MSSPA is a non-profit organization, it is always under tremendous pressure to raise enough money to meet the operating budget. Please come to South Windham and see for yourself what it is we do and, if that resonates, volunteer or write a check to help the horses.



Daniel J. Murphy is a shareholder in Bernstein Shur's Litigation Practice Group, where his practice concentrates on commercial and business litigation matters.

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