

2015 ASSISI AWARD

This is the 11th year Cause for Paws has hosted the Awards Program. Individually and cumulatively, the Assisi Award winners are leaving a legacy of selfless service resulting in not only saving countless lives, but also in improving the quality of life for all of our companion animals. These people, through volunteerism, advocacy, and ambassadorship, are making a difference by using their personal strengths, knowledge, skills and passions to make a difference. To the animals they are kind friends who give them walks, play with them, provide them with treats, tend to their wounds, or spend many patient hours soothing their fears. To the rest of us, these individuals are always angels and often times heroes. Whether working behind the scenes or directly with the animals, the commitment demonstrated by these people means the animals get the best care possible and are given every chance for a new beginning.

This brings us to our 2015 Assisi Award winners, Linda and Gary Dionne. Animals have always been a part of both their lives. While both grew up with pets, Linda in particular felt incredibly lucky that throughout her childhood her parents were able to nurture her love of animals, allowing her to share her life with a wide variety of pets. After they married, when Linda and Gary learned a long time friend needed to rehome a Borzoi, they travelled all the way to Georgia to adopt him. Later, when they decided to add a second dog, they opted to find and adopt rescued Greyhounds. Over the next ten years they contacted and visited many Greyhound rescues in several states and ultimately provided a forever home for several of these beautiful dogs who were no longer deemed to have value in the racing world.

About eight years ago Linda first became involved with the UPAWS when she started collecting and donating items on the shelter's wish list. When she saw there was a need for small animal bedding, she began providing clean computer paper for the cages. About a year later when retirement allowed her more free time, Linda signed up to volunteer every Tuesday and Thursday morning to clean cages and walk dogs. While seven years later, she is still cleaning cages and walking dogs, those jobs now represent just the tip of the iceberg. A recycler her whole life, Linda assumed the chore of taking care of all of the shelter's recyclables. She sorts and redeems all the returnable bottles and cans, hauls metal to the scrap yards for the couple of dollars it will bring to the shelter, and carts cardboard boxes and paper to the recycling center. Linda's efforts have not only eliminated one dumpster and saved UPAWS money in garbage disposal fees but has also turned trash to cash. Keeping up on recycling has also freed up valuable space at the shelter, something greatly appreciated by the staff. Shelter Manager, Lareina sported a big grin when asked about Linda's recycling. "She can get pretty bossy. She will come into my office and say, 'Fry, there are cardboard boxes in the dumpster again. You can't be putting those in there!' She is like a bossy aunt, telling us what to do but we really don't mind because Linda is family."

When Gary, a licensed electrician and all around handyman, retired a year later, it wasn't long before Linda recruited his services. One day while she was looking at what she described as four miles of extension cord running through the shelter to the freezer in the garage, she thought, "Gary can fix that." Gary not only wired the garage, he began his new

unpaid career as the shelter's maintenance engineer. Lareina recalls the first time meeting Gary. "He was pretty intimidating. He was this tall, physically imposing bald guy who spoke abruptly and didn't mince words. Everyone was a little afraid of him." It wasn't long, however, before that first impression was all but forgotten. If Linda was the bossy aunt, Gary was the no-nonsense uncle. Their dedication, sincerity, and exemplary work ethic have made them so valued by staff, their opinions and input are often sought out and highly valued.

While Gary doesn't have a set schedule, you can count on him to show up at the shelter whenever needed. When a small electrical fire broke out in 2012, Gary was there the next day, checking all the wiring. Big or small, when either Gary or Linda sees something that needs fixing or doing, they just jump in and get it done. Sometimes they just do it themselves, but if it requires getting estimates or finding contractors, they do that, too. Linda and Gary do some of the dirtiest and most physically challenging jobs out there. Over the years, either individually or together, they have:

- Replaced all the broken and inefficient light fixtures throughout the building
- Installed fans in the kennel
- Put up fencing
- Installed shelving throughout the shelter
- Kept the lawn mower and snowblower tuned up and had them repaired as needed
- Wired and rewired several areas of the shelter
- Had a cement floor poured in the garage (which included emptying and cleaning out the entire space and prepping the dirt floor as well as the area outside the garage)
- Got the parking lot graveled and leveled
- Made the arrangements for a drainage system to be installed in the parking lot after it flooded
- Hung new bulletin boards and secured the ones that were falling off the walls and installed roll holders for trash bags
- Repaired and replaced latches on the kennel doors and replaced door knobs on other doors
- Built floors for all the large cat condos, and attached rollers so they could be easily moved and cleaned
- Replaced the toilet; repaired the washer and dryer
- Installed heat tapes and salt pucks on the roof
- Put up snow fencing; and
- Enlarged the dog play yard area
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Linda also does most of the outside grounds maintenance such mowing, snow blowing and general clean-up. Outside of the shelter, she also fills in as needed cleaning cages at PetSmart and picks up bedding from several locations and delivers it to the shelter. And just in case something might get missed, they put up a "honey do" list for the staff and other volunteers to jot down jobs that need doing.

Just watching Linda work is exhausting, she is a speed demon. In trying to capture photos for this presentation, Ann Brownell complained, "I've been trying to get photos all morning but Linda is moving so fast, they're all blurry!"

But the Dionne's volunteering isn't limited to volunteering at the shelter.

About seven years ago, three things happened near the same time. Linda and Gary retired, they lost their very dependable in-house dog sitter, and they lost their last dog. At that time they decided to not adopt another dog, but because they knew they would still need an occasional "pet fix", chose to foster shelter pets. But even with fostering, they did not take the easy route. Nearly every dog they fostered had either medical or behavioral issues. Dodge had a shattered lens, Marla was recovering from hip surgery, and Hope had three legs. Then there was Paulie who recovering from parvo. One day when the Dionnes weren't home, she demonstrated her full recovery by jumping the baby gate and trashing the house. When Linda and Gary returned, she was once again innocently sitting in her confined area. Paulie was followed by Nya who was recovering from mange, and then Buster. Long term shelter resident, Dukie stayed at what Linda calls the "Dionne Spa" on three different occasions. He was followed by Amber, Buddy, and most recently, Fonzie, who stayed at the spa twice. Staff referred to Fonzie as Gary's "truck dog" as he was often seen riding shotgun next to Gary.

Active supporters in many ways, the Dionnes also volunteer at and participate in numerous fundraisers, often bringing friends. And Linda is a familiar face at off-site adoption events where she helps out wherever needed.

Outside of UPAWS, Linda has also become the go-to person in her neighborhood with it comes to animals in need. Not long ago a neighbor's dog got loose while the family was away and had an unfortunate encounter with a porcupine. Linda called upon a vet tech friend and together they removed the quills and returned the dog home, all before the owners returned. She and Gary are also increasingly being asked to pet sit. "Word just seems to spread," said Linda, "and more and more people are asking."

While what the Dionnes have done and continue to do for animals is impressive and worthy in and of itself of recognition and thanks, who they are is equally impressive.

Both have a work ethic that is unmatched. They not only volunteer in a multitude of tangible and measurable ways, on a daily basis they serve as advocates and ambassadors for animals and UPAWS. This past December, just by chance, I learned that when Linda heard a friend was presenting samples of UP made products to the State Legislature in Lansing, she put together a display board of UPAWS to include in her friend's presentation. Linda's and Gary's commitment, dependability, and reliability are unparalleled. They are also practical, down-to-earth, and show a wealth of common-sense. For the past year or so they have been attending the UPAWS monthly board meetings where their questions and comments often spark lively discussions. They are seldom without smiles on their faces and seem to derive as much

pleasure out of doing and giving as the shelter and animals derive from their efforts. Their enthusiasm and energy is infectious.

In a volunteer spotlight interview for the Pet Gazette in 2009, Linda was quoted as saying, "Retirees are kind of like the pets that show up on your doorstep, abandoned people looking for something to do." UPAWS hit the jackpot when the Dionne's showed up on our doorstep. We would like them to know that with UPAWS they will always have a home and a purpose, as well as a permanent place within our walls and within our hearts.

At this time, on behalf of the Board of Directors, the staff and most of all, the animals at UPAWS, I am honored and humbled to present Linda and Gary Dionne with the 2015 Assisi Award.



April 25, 2015