

Animal magnetism stars on Utah's pet radio station

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KANAB - Call it a Rover revelation, a pooch premonition, a mutt manifestation.

Hal Abrams was living in a doghouse, part of a radio promotion to help homeless pets in Anchorage back in 1999, when the idea hit: Why not start a radio station devoted to issues surrounding dogs, cats and other pets?

"Being with those dogs, I realized they were real, sentient beings, and I made the connection that they needed help," Abrams recalls from the Kanab studios of Animal Radio Network. "I also wanted to take on a real adventure and be on my own for the first time."

So, after leaving Alaska in 2001, Abrams and longtime friend Judy Francis moved to Oxnard, Calif., where they started the pet station in their apartment.

"I had a lot of experience in radio and knew all I needed was to get to a satellite by telephone that could then digitize [the program feed]," Abrams explains. "It was really cool because we could load the equipment into an RV and go anywhere."

In 2003, the couple hooked up with pet-supply company Petco and hit the road for a year in a roaming, RV-based radio station. They traveled to 40 cities, stopping at Petco stores and other locations to broadcast interviews with pet experts, pet owners and others involved in the \$38 billion-a-year industry.

In 2004, the pair arrived at Best Friends Animal Society, five miles north of Kanab, and helped the largest no-kill animal sanctuary in the world start Best Friends Radio Show.

By January 2005, Abrams and Francis yearned to get back to their commercial roots, so they parted ways with Best Friends to start working on their radio show from the Kanab house they share with a cat, Boogs.

"We love Kanab," Francis says.

The couple produce two-hour weekly animal-related shows of interviews and news that are sold to nearly a hundred AM and FM radio stations across the nation, including a handful in southern Utah. They also have a radio feed around the clock at their Web site, <http://AnimalRadio.com>, in addition to podcasts and cell-phone radio connections.

Besides news and interviews with authors and pet experts, their weekly broadcasts include chats with celebrities, including Betty White, Ed Asner, Gary Burghoff and rocker Patti Smith.

Lately, the scare about contaminated pet food has been a hot topic. Francis urges people to be careful preparing their own pet food; it may not be nutritionally balanced.

"While dogs can eat a bunch of junk along with protein," she says, "cats need a steady diet of just protein."

One popular guest is Marty Becker, a veterinarian who also appears on ABC's "Good Morning America."

Becker credits Animal Radio's Web site with carrying the first wide-ranging database on news about the pet-food recall before the Food and Drug Administration got up to speed.

The popular vet respects Abrams and Francis not only for the passion they bring to their work, but also for how they use the latest technology to reach listeners.

"They've embraced every technology - except smoke signals and carrier pigeons - and have a reach from Manhattan to Mayberry," Becker jokes.

He also is impressed with the range of pet issues the station covers.

"They're looking at the best thinking out there from all the top people on issues from acupuncture alternatives to [pet] therapies to parasite control to pet foods," Becker says. "They are also not afraid to tackle controversial subjects many would shy away from - like vaccinations, home-cooked pet food vs. commercial food and whether cats should be kept indoors to protect bird populations."

Dez Curtis, program manager for three radio stations in St. George, says the two-hour Animal Radio show is a regular on the AM and FM dials in southwestern Utah every Saturday at 6 a.m.

"It's helpful, informative," Curtis says. "We've broadcast it for three years, and it is very popular down here."

As for Abrams, he's just glad for the inspiration that came when his life went to the dogs eight years ago, so he could take to the airwaves for the dogs - and the cats and the birds and the bunnies and the . . .

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