

# BFF\*

\*Best Friends Forever

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**On the cover:** After originally coming to us from a local home, Bamboozle (whose new name is Lucy) is enjoying her new home in Boise, Idaho.



*Best Friends Animal Society demonstrates and promotes exemplary animal care and builds community programs and partnerships to help end the killing of more than 4,100 animals in America's shelters every day. Together, we can **Save Them All**.*

## Looking back, looking forward

Since the anniversary of our groundbreaking for the Sanctuary is in February, this issue features Cyrus Mejia, one of the founders, writing about that key moment in time for Best Friends. Cyrus was one of the seven founders who arrived on that snowy morning in Angel Canyon to start creating an animal sanctuary from nothing. (Francis Battista and I were also in that group.)

I have many memories from those days: driving an old pickup through the brush to create roads, all the adventures we had constructing buildings with minimal experience, unfreezing pipes at two o'clock in the morning because we hadn't buried them deep enough, etc. But most of my memories of those early days revolve around the changes we were making to the basic principles of animal welfare.

We were horrified, as you and all our supporters are, about the reality that unwanted animals were killed because they lacked homes. As you know, Best Friends was founded on the principle that killing healthy animals isn't an option. So, I remember feeling a profound satisfaction that I was with a group of people who were determined, despite the considerable challenges involved, to take a different approach and do whatever we could to promote and encourage saving those lives.

This was a spiritual satisfaction — that of saving the lives of the innocent, of righting a wrong, of making our society better. It elevates our lives and gives them meaning. Of course, it continues to this day.

It gives us all strength and immense purpose. It gives us the ability to overcome objections and obstacles, because we know that it is right. It gives us the ability to stay constant to the animals, no matter what challenges we face as a result.

It makes us bold, creative and determined to find answers. It makes us optimistic and positive. It provides us with the resolve to commit to saving the lives of all threatened animals in the nation's shelters by 2025.



A handwritten signature in orange ink that reads "Gregory Castle".

**Gregory Castle**  
Chief Executive Officer

# 1984: A look back

## Construction began on Groundhog Day

None of us had any doubts about what we were doing back then, but nevertheless, we were about to undertake an impossible task for which we were totally unprepared. In fact, some people even called us crazy! But Best Friends' founders were determined to build a sanctuary for unwanted pets on 3,000 acres of desert in the middle of nowhere, with no electricity, no water, no phone and (among us) no real building skills.

No big deal, right?

It was Groundhog Day, February 2, 1984, when we broke ground for the Sanctuary. I don't remember if the groundhog saw his shadow, but we did have a pretty long cold winter that year. That's when we discovered the local "permafrost" — not the frozen tundra of the great white north, but desert sand, saturated with melted snow frozen hard as rock that extended downward three or four feet. Desert permafrost!

Building things involves a lot of digging: digging foundations, digging trenches for water pipes and electric wires, and digging in sand that wouldn't budge. So, without a backhoe or other heavy machinery, our crew had to use picks and shovels. We banged on a long sharp steel post with a sledgehammer. We even fired up a propane torch to try and soften the frozen sand.

I always laugh these days when a group of us founders are asked to pose in hard hats with gold-painted shovels at a groundbreaking ceremony for a new building. It's nothing at all like our first groundbreaking.

Of the seven of us who arrived in Kanab that cold winter, the only ones with anything remotely resembling building experience were Paul

Eckoff and Steven Hirano. Paul had trained as an architect, so he knew how buildings were supposed to fit together, even if he hadn't actually built one. And Steven had previous experience as a handyman, doing repair and maintenance work. So, Paul became our crew boss and Steven was the job foreman.

Paul was the first person to actually live on the property. The rest of us shared a rented house in Kanab, while Paul camped out in a tiny travel trailer equipped with a wood stove — what I later learned was called a "sheep camp." Each day, Steven, Francis Battista, Gregory Castle, Antony Gleeson, Virgil Barstad and I drove up from town in a couple of old Chevy trucks to meet Paul for our job assignments.

Our first assignment was to build a bunkhouse where the crew could live while building the Sanctuary. We discovered something called a kit house, which could be delivered on a truck in sections to be assembled at the site. But rather than ordering one, Paul drew up plans for us to build our own kit house!

We constructed the walls in sections and put it all together on a concrete slab. It was quite simple, just 2x4 frames covered with plywood, filled with insulation, and then bolted together onto the foundation. While it was an unorthodox way to construct a building, we were proud of our bunkhouse — and what was intended to be a temporary structure lasted more than 20 years. In fact, when the new "bunkhouse" was built for offices, the maintenance team had a hard time taking the old one down. It seems the bolts holding our wall sections together had rusted in place and the whole thing had to be pushed over with a bulldozer. Paul would have had a good laugh.

We've certainly come a long way since that first cold Groundhog Day. And it's the same unorthodox thinking, problem-solving ability and determination to do a lot with a little that have seen Best Friends through all the ups and downs.

When the founders first declared that killing animals in shelters was wrong and should be stopped, there were many who called us crazy. They said we were just a bunch of naïve idealists who didn't know how the animal welfare world worked. So, what did we do? We built a sanctuary in the desert, then hired a lot more of those crazy idealists, and now we're well on the way to stopping the killing of dogs and cats in shelters nationwide by 2025.

Thank you all for joining the team. Together, we will Save Them All!

— *Cyrus Mejia, co-founder*



Cyrus Mejia, circa 1984 when Sanctuary construction began