

# Heavenly Help for Racing Greyhounds

By Judy Ruby

It all began on a summer's day in 1996. That's when Maggie McCurry saw a *National Geographic* special about racing greyhounds that changed her life. She was horrified to learn that tens of thousands of dogs were in jeopardy because their racing days were over.

"They call it retiring the dog, which is a nice euphemism for the dog didn't finish in the money enough," Maggie says. Most of those dogs were killed because there weren't enough people living close to the dog racing tracks who were willing to adopt them.

That was all Maggie had to hear. A licensed commercial pilot born in Durham, England, she had flown strictly for pleasure for almost twelve

years. "Just because you have a license to fly doesn't mean you have any place to go," Maggie says. "I spent lots of days flying somewhere for what amounted to very expensive tuna sandwiches. I wanted to do something useful."

Maggie learned that there was a tremendous need for her kind and generous heart, as well as her piloting skills. There are almost 50 greyhound racing tracks operating in 15 states. A female greyhound can produce three litters a year, each litter averaging six puppies. Approximately 80% of those dogs are registered to race; the rest are culled from the litters (and if you don't know what culled means, they didn't "make the grade" for whatever reason and

were killed before the age of 18 months). They start racing at about 18 months. The average racing career is two years, and they have to retire when they are five years old. Many "wash out" due to injury, age or by simply losing races. If a dog is lucky enough to end its career physically intact, it still faces a very uncertain future. The Humane Society of the United States estimates that

over 20,000 greyhounds are destroyed every year after their racing careers are over. Of the approximately 26,500 greyhounds that left the system in the year 2000, only about 13,000 were adopted. This "sport" has conservatively claimed the lives of an estimated 1,000,000 dogs in its 73-year U.S. history.

Soon after she saw the television special, Maggie attended an adoption event organized by Retired Racers, a Los Angeles-based greyhound rescue and adoption group. She met Linda Brown, the founder of Retired Racers, who provides the first step in making these animals "adoptable." She bathes and grooms them and teaches them how to be house pets. "You have to remember that these are dogs who have never done anything but be on a race course and live in crates," Maggie said. "They have to learn about couches, chairs and all the other things around a house."

At that event, Maggie volunteered her time and her airplane to transport retired racing greyhounds to new adoptive homes. She and her partner, Mark Pettijohn, were flying their first mission two weeks later. Maggie formed Wings for Greyhounds, a non-profit organization, to assist greyhound rescue groups by providing air transportation service. She and Mark work with numerous greyhound rescue organizations to provide air taxi service. Sometimes their plane becomes an ambulance to get a rescued dog emergency medical attention. Other times it's a speedy means to place a deserving dog in a loving home.

Maggie McCurry with Serengeti Kahola (left) and The Late Great Wings For Greyhounds Mission Commander Lanky Lance (right).



Photo credit: Mark Pettijohn

"These are not dogs, but four-legged birds."

Maggie makes about three trips a month, flying four dogs scheduled for "retirement" each trip. Many are flown to states where there is no racing and the odds are better for finding homes.

Her original Mission Commander, Lanky Lance, was the lucky boy who "adopted" Maggie. He was her companion for almost eight years until he suddenly passed away last summer. Lance was "the boss" and he supervised his four-legged passengers, providing a calming effect for greyhounds unaccustomed to flying. The rear seats of the aircraft were removed and replaced with assorted blankets, quilts, pillows and cushions. Original artwork decorates the rear windows – greyhound "nose paintings."

One of Maggie and Mark's most memorable flights involved an eight-month old racing greyhound named Marlee. She was left outside in the freezing cold by her trainer. Her tongue froze to the water bowl and had to be amputated. A dog with no tongue, who drooled a lot and could not race anymore, was not a good candidate for adoption and her trainer was going to have her destroyed. She was taken in by a rescue group but their veterinarian didn't think she could survive with her handicap. But he didn't know Marlee! She taught herself to eat and drink by leaning her head back to swallow, just like a bird. Her story was told on the web page of her rescue group, Friends of Greyhounds. Ten months later, a Seattle woman called to say she would adopt Marlee, sight unseen. Unfortunately, no commercial

airline would fly Marlee to her new home, partly because of her disability and partly because an Oklahoma heat wave was preventing animals from flying in the cargo holds of aircraft.



Luckily for Marlee, Maggie and Mark were negotiating the purchase of a larger airplane and they decided if they got the plane, they would take Marlee to Seattle. So Maggie and Mark picked up the new plane in Hot Springs, Arkansas, flew to Tulsa, Oklahoma, to pick up Marlee, to Tucson where they took on two additional greyhounds to deliver to Los Angeles, then on to Seattle where they were met by newspaper and television reporters, volunteers from Puget Sound Greyhound Adoption and best of all, Marlee's new mom.

Last July, Maggie's impressive "Great Greyhound Goodwill Air Tour" took her on a coast-to-coast trip to 25 cities in 18 states. She traveled over 8,000 miles on a series of flights to take retired racers from racetracks, kennels and breeding farms to adoption groups all over the country. Her astonishing determination has raised public awareness to the fact that greyhounds need homes when their racing days are over and because of

their wonderful temperament they make great pets. And her reward? It's the greatest there is. "I am the only pilot I know," says Maggie, "who gets paid in kisses."

Operating costs for Wings for Greyhounds amounts to more than \$20,000 per year. The project is funded by grants, donations, corporate sponsorship and Maggie's own money. Maggie and Mark will continue to fly greyhounds as long as they can. They would like to set up chapters elsewhere with volunteer pilots. So far, Wings for Greyhounds is the only company in the world devoted exclusively to greyhound rescue flights.

The greyhound's lithe appearance and aerodynamic look may have prompted the French poet Alphonse de Lamartine to say of the greyhounds he kept in the early 17th century, "these are not dogs, but four-legged birds." And Maggie McCurry has given them wings.

For more information about Wings for Greyhounds, please visit their Web site [www.wingsforgreyhounds.org](http://www.wingsforgreyhounds.org) or contact them at the following address:

Wings for Greyhounds, P.O. Box 21065, Sedona, AZ 86341-1065. Phone: 1-888-4WEFLYM. 🐾

*Judy Ruby has worked for Doris Day for 33 years. She was the director of the Doris Day Pet Foundation from its inception in 1977 until its retirement in 1996. Currently serving on the DDAF Board, Judy now lives in Lexington, Kentucky, with her husband, Ron, her son, Chris, five dogs, six cats and two horses.*