

“Anne’s book, *Saved*, is an honest account of the power of purpose and commitment, as an antidote to fear and loss. Anne walks through her deepest fears and discovers hope, humor and unconditional love amidst immense devastation. As she states ‘Sanity dictates that you go with the flow, never knowing where it will take you.’ Allow yourself to be inspired and to enjoy her wonderful journey!”

Annie Denver, MA
Aspen, CO

“If you look up the word hope in the dictionary you might just see Anne Gurchick’s picture there. In the middle of her own battle with cancer she reaches out to save some of the most forgotten and battered victims of Hurricane Katrina. Anne’s story is cause for celebration and the parallels between her journey to wellness and reaching out to the ‘four leggeds’ is further proof that we are inextricably connected to our animals and if we choose to listen, the lessons they give us can change our lives.”

John St. Augustine
Radio Host and Author,
Every Moment Matters

“*Saved* is a celebration of friendship, in all of its various forms, that candidly brings to the forefront life’s unexpected curve balls which can either destroy us or make us whole. Anne’s irrepressible spirit proves that saving oneself is often easiest done by saving another, and her stories beg the reader to respect community on a universal level. This is a call to action: a reminder that the smallest gesture can make a world of difference, and finding beauty in what is broken is a special gift indeed.”

Lisa Consiglio
Executive Director,
Aspen Writers’ Foundation

“*Saved* reads like a conversation between Anne and a friend about her health issues while on a noble mission to rescue dogs after Hurricane Katrina. This is a significant memoir of a woman’s personal journey, but more importantly, a view of the woman herself and an example of how we can make a difference.”

Damiano de Sano Iocovozzi MSN FNP CNS
Author, *Don’t Go to the Doctor without Me*

“*Saved* offers a side of the Hurricane Katrina disaster that was rarely reported or considered—the attempt to rescue and house thousands of family pets that were displaced from their owners. But the book is more than that: it is also a stirring memoir of a woman’s effort to reclaim the vitality of her life through undertaking such a courageous act as rescue operations, halfway across the country. *Saved!* stirred my heart and reaffirmed the power of the mind and soul. It will stir yours, too.”

—Robert Yehling
Author, *Writes of Life*,
Professor of Creative Writing,
Ananda College of Living Wisdom

Saved

A True Story

Cancer, Katrina Dogs and Me

ANNE GURCHICK





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Cover photo, Anne and Stryder by Linda Koones

Cover photo, Stranded dogs in the Hurricane Katrina flooding
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Dedication

To

Melinda Goldrich, Bland Nesbit & Jan Panico

&

*Hanuman, Hannah & Bella who were with me at the beginning
and comforted me throughout the journey*

Acknowledgments

This book is the story of a short but significant period in my life, however, as with anyone, our life is not only about us but about the friends who accompany us on the journey. Friends who inspire us when we wane, provide confidence when we doubt, hope when we lose faith and humor when we need to smile. Our journey through life, while unique, is rarely a solo journey but more a team effort.

I don't know if I actually would have written this book if it weren't for Annie Denver who was the first to say "write it." My deepest gratitude to you for your friendship, for helping me find my way through some tough challenges and for providing a special retreat deep in the mountains where I could relax and refocus. Many thanks also to Jenny Deutschendorf who read the first few chapters and encouraged me to keep going. Our frequent hikes with our packs and long talks are always special.

Thanks also to Cheryl Wyly for being the first to read the story in its entirety, for loving it and giving me the confidence to actually agree to publish it when I wasn't sure I would.

Heartfelt thanks to my sister, Mary Louise Mayo, for dropping everything in her life and driving to Colorado to be with me during my long surgery and ensuing doctor appointments. She sat with me for hours as they prepared me for surgery and then continued to sit late into the night waiting for me to come out. She rarely thought about herself but only of keeping me comfortable.

To John St. Augustine for agreeing to look at a few pages, seeing a story and sending it to my publisher, Ginny Weissman. To Ginny for her guidance in writing, her comments and edits and, most importantly, for her shared passion and love for homeless animals and commitment to finding a place for them. To my publisher, Paul Burt, for his kindness, patience, contemplation and for making sure we got a great cover.

Many thanks, of course, to Bland Nesbit, who shares the same intense passion and love for homeless animals as I do. She is as dedicated as I am to ending the killing of as many innocent pets as we can. To Melinda Goldrich, a dear friend and so much a part of this story who, despite her abhorrence of any car trip over an hour, persevered through the long road trip home with humor and only brief moments of utter frustration. The memories of our trip are cherished and something we will both always look back on fondly. To Jan Panico for her friendship and positive attitude. Despite all the trying situations we found ourselves in, Jan remained calm and provided comfort and humor. Bland, Melinda and Jan's love for and desire to help animals made them the perfect accomplices on the adventure.

To Seth Sachson for opening the doors of animal rescue to me and for inviting me to be a part of what has become the most inspiring thing in my life, saving the lives of homeless animals about to be killed for no reason other than lack of space. As we worked together we became the best of friends and survived some trying times. Seth selflessly opened his heart and the Aspen Animal Shelter to allow us to bring in rescues that otherwise would have been killed. There aren't enough words of appreciation to express what that means and I am grateful to share his passion and learn from him. To the Aspen Animal Shelter staff, Chad Clark, Sadie Thimsen, Alex Lara and Victor Salas who selflessly work 24/7 providing shelter, love and socialization to so many homeless animals. These are the real heroes.

To my current pups Bella, Max, Stryder and Haddie who had to forego their daily hikes in order for me to finish this book but who did so willingly . . . most of the time. My love for you fills my heart and makes me smile.

Finally, to those who volunteered to help the animals displaced and left homeless by Hurricane Katrina and to animal rescue and welfare workers and volunteers everywhere. We face hardships and must make choices every day. It is devastating to each of us when an innocent animal must die and yet they do by the millions in our country every year. Keep up the fight—it is difficult and we have a long road and tough journey ahead of us but we are making a difference and *will* end the needless practice of killing adoptable pets in our country.

Adopt a shelter dog or cat—they are the most amazing pets and you are saving a life by doing so.



Bland, Jan, Liz, Anne and Melinda at their 2006 reunion

Chapter 1

“IT’S CANCER . . . AND IT’S BAD.”

My eyes well with tears as Dr. Nelson speaks, his eyes bearing the compassion so necessary at a time like this. My gut wrenches and I can’t breathe. The pain is unbearable but momentarily shadowed by panic. My safe and comfortable world has shattered into pieces that suspend in front of me, waiting for more information before they crash to the floor. I want to drop to the floor, right here in Dr. Nelson’s office, close my eyes and curl up in a ball until what he has just said goes away.

I look at the big brown eyes staring back at me with concern. They belong to my sweet pea, Hannah, my gentle and loving Rottweiler. It isn’t fair that her cancer has returned after such a valiant fight. Just six months ago, Dr. Nelson had assured me they had gotten it all and she would be fine. I thought we were clear on that.

He is speaking words that I can barely distinguish. His lips are moving; although I don’t really hear him, somehow his words register. Hannah must start chemo tomorrow and I should take her to Colorado State University in Ft. Collins as soon as I reach Colorado.

I’m leaving Austin the day after tomorrow. My furniture and belongings are already gone. My mind is in turmoil trying to figure out how to pull everything together given this new development. It seems impossible.

I rush home and as I walk in my phone is ringing. My sister starts rattling details of her son's plan to arrive tomorrow to help me with my drive to Colorado. She's going on and on without pausing for a breath so I interrupt her.

"Hannah's cancer is back." Saying the words suddenly makes it all real. Painful emotions flood over me. This time, I throw myself down onto the couch, unable to deal as the grief hits me.

"I wish it was me and not her." I sob.

"Are you serious? Don't *ever* say anything like that again!" my sister reprimands. "Seriously—never again."

I wake early the next morning and rush Hannah to the veterinarian oncologist. By now she has stopped eating and will barely lift her head. It is heart wrenching. I love this little girl more than I ever thought possible. She will stay at the clinic overnight after receiving her first round of chemo and a battery of tests.

The next morning, I arrive for Hannah. Although her tests aren't back, she has been given the green light to travel, since her health has improved. Plus, we're heading to one of the best canine cancer centers in the country. The vet tech brings her out and I rush to hug her, burying my face in her familiar, sweet-smelling fur. She is equally excited to see me, and her little butt wiggles back and forth enthusiastically.

We hit the highway bright and early the following morning. Excited and anxious, I am on the cusp of fulfilling my dream of moving to the mountains. But a cloud of apprehension hangs over me as I think about the detour to the vet hospital in Ft. Collins and what it will bring. That afternoon, I'm lost in thought, speeding through the Texas panhandle, when my cell phone rings. I recognize the vet's number. I take a deep breath and answer, afraid of what she will tell me.

"Hi, Anne, this is Dr. Jenkins. I have Hannah's test results and I'm beyond confused. I really don't know what to say but the tests came back negative. There is no cancer."

I'm not sure I hear her correctly. "What? What do you mean? What does that mean?" I'm flabbergasted, flooded with mixed emotions.

"Again, I really don't know what to say. I'm happy they're negative, sorry Hannah went through the chemo and utterly baffled. I am glad you're heading to CSU as I'm eager to hear what they have to say."

We say our good-byes and all I can do is stare at the highway in front of me. Can I be so bold as to feel ecstatic? Could it be possible that the test results are correct? Would Hannah really be OK?

It was too good to be true.

When we got to the CSU vet hospital, Hannah was, indeed, cancer-free. They diagnosed her with a severe lung infection.

Just five months later, the words I cried out in anguish to my sister came back to haunt me. I was diagnosed with stage II breast cancer.

Chapter 2

I STARE IN THE MIRROR at my bald head, shallow skin and hollowed eyes. My head isn't bald, technically. It seems to be covered with a baby fine layer of what looks like peach fuzz. I finally have my eyebrows and eyelashes back. That makes me smile. It really does come down to the little things in life. It's been two months since I finished my chemotherapy and radiation treatments, and my body is a testament to the damage. I open my robe and look at the scars on my chest where my breasts used to be. I feel somewhat deformed, my once pert breasts replaced now with hard, round implants, my nipples replaced with scars that run the length of the implants. I run my finger over the scar just below my neck where the port that fed the chemo into my body had been located. I raise my right arm and look at the scars where the lymph nodes were removed. I pray that the cancer hasn't spread beyond the lymph nodes that tested positive.

This bodily inspection has become something of a routine for me. Finally past the shock of the diagnosis and the numbness of the months of treatment, I now find myself mesmerized, on a daily basis, with the aftermath. Having been poked, prodded, cut into, radiated and exposed to complete strangers, I still feel somewhat removed from my physical body. What I see in the mirror now isn't my body, but a roadmap of the cancer that tried to rob me of life. I refuse to let it. I think back to the day I was diagnosed, coming

home and throwing myself on my bed. Alone. Scared. Lying in the fetal position and sobbing for what seemed like hours, but in reality was only ten or fifteen minutes. One day, life is normal and care-free, and the next, it's not. It's that quick. It's all so surreal, since I've never been sick other than the occasional flu or hangover. I let out a breath. *I'm alive*, I remind myself. *It could have been much worse*. I stand, looking at my naked body, trying to feel the depth of the experience but I'm unable to feel any emotion. Bored with staring at myself in the mirror, I search for a distraction to make me forget my bald head and scarred body.

In the background, I hear the television blasting the latest news about a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico heading straight for New Orleans. I hear the name. I chuckle at the irony, thinking of my cousin's girlfriend, Katrina, who also has the ability to cause mass destruction, albeit emotional. The growing concern in the newscaster's voice again distracts me from my thoughts. Closing my robe, I turn to watch the coverage to see how close the hurricane actually is to landfall. A green-glow emanates from the television. As I walk closer, the picture captivates me. The radar image is of a hurricane that appears to be the size of the entire Gulf of Mexico and, yes, heading straight for New Orleans.

In the days that follow, I find myself glued to the television watching the twenty-four hour, live coverage of the mass evacuations along the Gulf Coast, followed by coverage of the storm as it slams ashore. I'm sure nothing could be worse than enduring this nightmare, but the devastating floods that follow prove me wrong. For the next two days, I watch in horror as thousands of people are left stranded on rooftops, begging to be rescued. I see the near-riots at the Superdome and the complete paralysis of the entire city's government. We all watch, a nation stunned at the surprising incompetence of our government and their inability to handle the disaster.

With mounting sadness, I watch people standing firm and refusing to leave their pets behind. My heart aches as they are forced

to do so. Tears roll down their cheeks, distraught at being pulled off a rooftop and away from their beloved pet. Their confused and frightened pets stand abandoned in the flooded city. As coverage comes in from the streets, I realize these pets may be the lucky ones. Frightened and starving animals, once pampered family pets, fearfully roam the deserted streets. I am horrified when I hear stories of pets being left behind, chained to porches and drowning in the rising waters, unable to free themselves and swim to safety. Initially, I can't understand how anyone can leave their pets, given the enormity of the disaster. In the days that follow, I realize that the pets have been left for many reasons, but primarily because their owners had no choice. The pets aren't allowed into the shelters that have been set up. A person faced two choices: leave your pet, or potentially lose your life. Due to a lack of adequate disaster planning, these innocent animals are left to fight for their own survival and, in far too many cases, to die.

I look away from the television and stare out my window. It is a spectacular, clear, crisp early autumn day. The aspen trees high on the mountains are ablaze, a bright, sunshine yellow, contrasting against the dark green pines. The maple trees, sparsely scattered among the aspen and pine, have turned color, their leaves bright orange like glowing embers. I try to remind myself to look at the mountains every day. They make me forget, if only for a few minutes, my "cancer life." I love the mountains and feel privileged to live among their majestic beauty. It is a stark contrast to the scenes on the television, as I turn back to watch more of the Katrina coverage. Forgetting my own fears, I realize I want to be there, in New Orleans. I have to help care for these innocent animals and try to save as many of the beloved pets as possible.