



IN LOVING MEMORY OF TRAVELER

She arrived May 3, 1996; a citizen in Wheaton had seen her walking along by herself. The citizen thought the opossum was too small to be alone and brought it to Second Chance for care. I was still operating the center out of my home in Potomac, but the building in Gaithersburg was being readied for occupation. My small room was bursting with animals and I was eager to move to larger quarters. Still, I found room for one young 'possum.

The young animal appeared to be uninjured although she did have a small kink in her tail. The next morning, she seemed to have a bit of a sneeze and was extremely active circling continuously within the confines of her cage. I suspected she had suffered a head injury and placed her on an antibiotic in case the sneeze indicated a respiratory infection. For the next couple of weeks, the 'possum traveled around her cage until she was worn out. Once wearied, she would simply stop and go to sleep wherever she was; middle of the cage, in her food dish or in her nest box. One of my volunteers, noticing the 'possum's endless travels, promptly named her Traveler.



On June 1, 1996, the big move to Gaithersburg took place. Hand-fed babies were the first to be moved as volunteers were on hand at the new location to keep up with the frequent feedings. One by one, the cages and supplies were carted from my home to the old farm house. Toward the end of that sunny Saturday, the "low maintenance" animals, including Traveler, made the move. Sunday saw the move completed and none of the animals seemed any the worse for the wear.

Over the next few months, the circling slowed and finally stopped all together. Traveler appeared to be recovering quite well. Although she was very non-aggressive, we thought nothing of it as we often have adult 'possums that are easily handled. Finally, around the beginning of August, we decided it was time to release the young animal. We carried her to the back of the property and placed her in the grass. She sniffled, snuffled and started to walk; one step, two steps, stop and pull whiskers. Something definitely was not right! Every time she took a couple of steps, she had to stop and pull at her whiskers as if she thought something was on her face. We returned her to her cage and I wondered if I was misreading the signs, if she was really okay and I was just delaying her release because she was so sweet. A week or so later, we tried releasing her again with the same results. I watched her closely and decided I was not mistaken, she definitely had a problem. This animal could not possibly survive in the wild; her brain seemed to misread what her whiskers were sensing. Instead of realizing that it was just grass brushing her face, she seemed to think something was on her and she had to stop to clean herself. She appeared oblivious to everything else around her and probably would not have survived even 24 hours in the wild. Her disposition, however, made her a good candidate as an educational animal. Thus began Trav's career as goodwill ambassador for 'possum-dom.

Most 'possums have a number of defensive postures that they use to convince potential predators, including people, that they are ferocious creatures best left alone. If cornered, they will stare you in the face, show their teeth, drool, and even give a bit of a growl. Over time, we realized that Traveler had never displayed any of these behaviors. She did not know that she should be afraid, that she needed to defend herself from danger. My decision not to release her was right on; she'd have been an easy meal for any predator. In fact, we had to keep an eye on her when she was loose in the clinic. She wandered through all the rooms and, occasionally, onto the side porch. If we had herons or geese that could get their bills through the bars of the cage, they would strike out and hit Traveler as she passed.

Traveler became quite a hit around our Center and was in great demand at schools, scout camps, garden clubs, etc. In February 1998, we applied for and received our Class "C" Exhibitor permit from USDA. This made Traveler "legal" and made her our only legitimate permanent resident. For two years, Traveler made friends with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people of all ages. "I've never pet a 'possum," became a frequent comment from visitors. People marveled at the special features of North America's only marsupial. School children learned new words like "prehensile," "nocturnal" and "marsupial."

Trav appeared on TV several times, most recently on Fox 5 morning news. She won hearts everywhere she went with her sweet, non-complaining nature. Never did she display the slightest displeasure at being held, petted, or examined. Recently, Trav's arthritis was a concern and she was given medication to help ease the stiffness. A 'possum's normal life span is only 3-5 years and this was the first sign of her aging. We knew her time was running out. On Sunday, June 13, I noticed she was obviously weakened, and her pouch was moist and smelled of infection. We cleaned her pouch and began antibiotics. Monday morning, I checked on Trav first thing. She was still alive and I was hopeful we would be able to get her problems under control. Sadly, a volunteer discovered she had died quietly around twelve noon, June 14, 1999. She died as she had lived, quietly and uncomplaining. On Tuesday, June 15, Traveler was buried here at Second Chance. Bill Kenealy, jack of all trades and Board member, constructed a beautiful casket and Trav was placed gently in her bed, wrapped in a soft blanket, into the box. Volunteer Kim Patterson offered a can of sardines and flowers were placed in the casket by some of her young friends. Words were said, tears were shed, and Trav was finally released.

As I write this, a large lump in my throat, I marvel at how a small, voiceless creature can affect so many people simply by her gentle nature. She is sorely missed. Other 'possums will come and go here at Second Chance, but there will never be another Traveler. Rest in peace, dear friend.

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