

## **The twisted case of animal collector Vikki Kittles offers a look at the psychology of people who feel a compulsion to acquire more animals than they can care for**

By PAT FORGEY

ASTORIA, Ore. - Despite months of jail, Vikki Kittles is likely every bit the animal collector today that she was the day she was arrested with 115 filthy, diseased, malnourished dogs penned up in an old school bus east of Astoria, Oregon, USA.

Though animal collector syndrome is slowly becoming better known, at that time in April, 1993 few people in Clatsop County knew what an animal collector was.

One of those who did was Tommie Brunick, the county's animal control supervisor and a 20-year veteran of the animal control business. Another was Kittles, a self-professed animal collector. Collectors such as Kittles are the bane of animal rights groups and animal control officers like Brunick. When collecting gets out of hand, they are the ones who see the tragic results for the dogs, cats, and other animals involved.

"Every major humane organization is critical of collectors because invariably they do great harm," according to Dennis Fetko, an animal behavior expert who advised Clatsop County on the phenomenon during the Kittles case.

Collectors can range from the well meaning elderly lady who feeds all the neighborhood strays, but provides no veterinary care and has none spayed or neutered to drastic cases such as Kittles, said Randy Lockwood, a Humane Society of the United States vice president. He's studied more than 100 such cases and was an expert witness at Kittles' trial.

"I've met many Vikki Kittles over the last decade, but she is almost the textbook case," he said.

Lockwood has published articles on the collector syndrome, but said that those who have studied it still don't know whether it's an obsessive/compulsive disorder or an addiction, but that collectors have elements of both.

Simply put, an animal collector is considered to be someone who accumulates more animals than they can care for, according to those who have been studying such cases.

For the animals, that can range from a lack of the attention and affection they need to malnutrition, parasites, disease resulting in prolonged suffering and death.

There's no set number of animals which is too many, they say. Though such people have probably always been around, they've only been studied as a pathology for a little more than a decade, Lockwood said.

Collectors often profess a love for animals, but in practice experts like Lockwood and Fetko say it's a twisted passion which often harms or even kills the animals. Animal collectors often care more about their control over the animals than the suffering that

they are inflicting on the animals. Often they are unable to even recognize the suffering.

Collectors also share another common trait, a desire for secrecy.

When a neighbor in Clatsop County tipped authorities to the presence of Kittles' school bus load of animals in an isolated rural area east of Astoria, she was aghast at the prospect of discovery. Knowing from past experience what the attention of authorities might bring down upon an animal collector, she took quick action to try to fend off an inquiry.

First she called the 911 dispatch center and told them that everything was OK and that there was no reason to come out and make an in-person check.

That just piqued Brunick's interest.

When she got a hold of Kittles on the phone, she asked how many dogs there were. Kittles didn't want to answer. Brunick, fearing that she had a collector on her hands, offered a guess.

"Are there more than 20 but less than 50?" she asked. "About that," Kittles responded. Kittles had good reason for trying to mislead Brunick. She's had repeated run-ins with the law over the years, and was afraid that attention might bring the more of the same.

"I did not want to tell her how many dogs I had, no doubt about it," she later admitted in court.

In Florida Kittles had done the same thing, according to a detective who investigated her there. She was then living in a house crowded with animals.

Manatee County Sheriff's Department Detective Ned Foy entered the house and found it filled with feces, empty dog food sacks, and even dead bodies of other dogs. In a back bedroom he found two horses.

"She was living just totally like an animal," he said.

When Brunick and sheriff's deputies got to Kittles' bus, in an unincorporated rural area east of Astoria, Brunick found what she'd feared. Deputies and volunteers from the animal shelter worked late into the night to empty Kittles' bus of dogs. They resumed early the next morning, and when they finally finished late in the afternoon they'd found 115 dogs, four cats and two chickens.

The next two years were a nightmare for Brunick, as the county's two animal control officers and a handful of volunteers tried to care for many times the number of animals to which the county was accustomed to.

The case languished in the legal system for more than two years, and at one point Brunick even had to hire her own attorney to keep protect the animals from Kittles. She was later named national Animal Control Officer of the Year for her efforts.

Lockwood said that the attempt at avoiding discovery was typical of collectors, as was minimizing the extent of the problem.

An animal collector will often say "I can't let you in the house right now, it's a little dirty,' when in fact it's three feet deep in feces," Lockwood said.

Kittles bitterly fought the charges against her, and at the same time offered a spirited defense of animal collecting.

"I am frankly not ashamed to say that I am an animal collector," she said.

In Kittles' defense of animal collectors, she likened it to a way of life which is simply different. Whatever she did, she said, was done to save dogs' lives.

Kittles said that her goal was to save animals from euthanasia, and that authorities' attempts to keep her from doing that were akin to religious persecution.

"I refuse to kill," she said, "That is my religious conscience." Kittles said that the term "animal collectors" was developed by a network of veterinarians, animal control groups, and others who used the term like the most vicious of racial epithets to stop people like her from saving animals from euthanasia.

"These veterinarians kill animals on a daily basis, and they do it for money," she said.

According to Lockwood, Kittles' attacks on veterinarians and conspiracy allegations are not unusual.

"They claim to be picked upon for a lifestyle that's a little different," he said, when in fact it is a lifestyle which is based on the unnecessary suffering of animals, sometimes dozens upon dozens of animals.

Kittles was convicted of 42 counts of animal neglect for treating the animals she'd picked up across the country so poorly that many suffered severe psychological or physical damage. About 80 percent of the dogs rescued from Kittles were able to be placed in adoptive homes; the remainder either died while Kittles was awaiting trial and refused to allow them medical care or had to be euthanized.

Now that Kittles is being released, District Attorney Josh Marquis and others are concerned that she remains a continuing danger to animals. She has about 4 years on probation left during which time she is not allowed to possess animals.

When Judge Berkeley Smith sentenced her he ordered counselling in an effort to break her of her animal collecting, however Kittles refused to cooperate with state psychiatrists. That resulted in probation violations which added months to her sentence, but eventually the counselling requirement was dropped. "Without counselling, the recidivism rate for collectors is pretty much 100 percent," Lockwood warned.

## **ANIMAL COLLECTOR CHARACTERISTICS:**

An apparent need to have many animals, and usually many inanimate objects as well: an addiction to clutter

Intelligence and communication skills: combined with a shrewd ability to attract sympathy for themselves, no matter how abused their animals may be. Enablers who fund collectors' efforts are also common.

A stubborn refusal to part with any of their animals, either through adoption of relatively healthy animals or euthanasia of sick ones. Sometimes, they even keep the dead ones.

A clandestine lifestyle - there is often a stark contrast between the collector's public persona and his/her private life. Though they are sometimes found in cities, isolated rural areas better afford the isolation collectors seek.

A tendency to deny reality - they insist that ill animals are healthy; that those confined for long periods in small cages or kennels are comfortable; that overcrowding does not subject animals to severe stress and related diseases; etc.

Recidivism - Unless expert psychiatric care is obtained, collectors almost invariably return to old ways, even if convicted of cruelty to animals.

Claims of special knowledge or skills - Animal collectors often maintain that they - and only they - can cure their animals medical problems through secret or special remedies.

Source: New York State Humane Association; Randy Lockwood

Forgey Bio: Freelance journalist Pat Forgey lives in Seaside, Ore., and was the only reporter to cover the entire Kittles court saga, reporting for a several newspapers, including The Oregonian of Portland. He can be reached by E-mail at [pforgeya@pacifier.com](mailto:pforgeya@pacifier.com).

Vickie Rene Kittles, also known as Susan Dietrich, was convicted on 42 counts of Animal Neglect in Astoria, Oregon in February 1995 after five weeks of trial, months of delay, and years of suffering for the animals she claimed to love. Kittles has a history of such incidents and is likely to begin the same destructive cycle all over again after she completes her 7-month sentence in Oregon.

Josh Marquis, District Attorney for Clatsop County and the Prosecutor in charge of Kittles' case tells the story below.

The case concluded what some called the world's longest dental appointment without anaesthesia. Kittles was able to drag the case out almost two years through endless manipulation of people and the legal system. She was afforded nine different court-appointed lawyers - none of whom met with her satisfaction, and went through six judges. The judge who tried the case was so traumatized that he refuses to have anything further to do with the case or Vickie Kittles.

Kittles, who has a long criminal record of assaultive conduct dating back to the late 60s, surfaced most publicly in Broward County Florida in the early 1980s when she was charged with various crimes after neighbors complained about the scores of dogs and two horses she kept in her mother's suburban house. Kittles claimed then - and now - that she is the victim of a massive government conspiracy, somehow tied to the Drug Enforcement Administration, that sought to poison her and "her" dogs.

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She was eventually run out of one part of Florida only to surface in another with her aged mother, Jean Sullivan, who has not been seen since living in filth with her daughter in rural Manatee County, Florida. From there Kittles (alone) went on to Mississippi, where she convinced some good-hearted souls that she would "save" scores of dogs by taking them to a "no-kill" shelter in Colorado.

From Mississippi she fled to Colorado where she once again claimed persecution. She left a wake of well-meaning vets with unpaid bills and sponsors whom she turned on when they failed to give her everything she wanted. From Colorado in the late 80s she travelled to rural Washington where she and "her" dogs were delivered by a semi-truck. True to form, she was successful in conning some wealthy backers to send her \$15,000 which she used to buy a school bus that became her home, and the prison for over 100 dogs. She once again wrung every bit of kindness - and money - out of her would-be benefactor before accusing her too of being involved in a plot.

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She then moved across the Columbia River to rural Clatsop County Oregon where she was finally confronted by Animal Control Supervisor Tommi Brunich on April 16, 1993. Brunich found a positively surreal scene in which Kittles shrieked threats at officers and neighbors while grasping a dog that was continually convulsing. The dog, which had received no veterinary care but that "special knowledge" possessed by Kittles, died despite the best efforts of local vets. When the dog was autopsied there was absolutely no food in its system or ANY body fat - a sign of long and painful starvation.

The scene on board the bus was worse - 115 dogs, four cats, and two roosters crammed into a bus caked with urine and feces, stinking so bad that officers used gas masks to go inside. Kittles boasted at trial that she had not let any of the dogs off the bus for weeks to prevent them from getting fleas. The dogs were, however, suffering from almost every other parasite, including hookworm, whipworm, and in at least 16 cases, deadly heartworm.

After Kittles was arrested she threatened to sue anyone who touched "her" dogs. Despite her claims of love for the dogs she visited them only once and actually

convinced a judge to FORBID the state from getting medical treatment for any of the dogs.

When I took office in the spring of 1994 Kittles was merrily holding the whole court system hostage, alternately ranting and raving, and filing literally hundreds of self-styled legal motions. Eventually we got the dogs treated for heartworm, and despite Kittles best efforts to delay the trial, were scheduled to finally go to court on August 2, 1994. Despite strong objections from my office the judge had permitted Kittles to live out of state - just across the river, and when the trial date came, Kittles refused to show up, requiring an extradition fight which took 3 months just to get her back to Oregon.

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In a trial that should have taken two days, Kittles berated the judge, me, the witnesses, the jurors, and the audience, and only later in the trial was finally sentenced to spend a total of 71 days in jail for contempt. Kittles used every artifice available to endlessly question witnesses about irrelevant material and when her turn came to give her side, she talked steadily for two and a half days. The jury - often the target of her accusations of being genetically deficient - took only a couple of hours before unanimously convicting her on all 42 counts.

The case drew huge attention from regional media who sent satellite TV trucks to cover the more spectacular parts of the bizarre trial. Kittles is an animal collector, a title she now proudly wears despite the testimony of Humane Society of the United States Vice-President Randy Lockwood that animal collectors are much like drug addicts in their pathology, and much more interested in themselves than "their" animals. She is now serving a seven-month jail sentence, which also forbids her from owning or even being around animals. She is likely to leave Oregon when released and will probably start collecting somewhere else in the United States.

As D.A. I usually handle murder cases, and Kittles is in my opinion one of the most dangerous, evil people I have ever encountered. She has enough psychosis to be exasperating, and enough cunning to bend the system to her will. Like any really nasty virus, she should be confronted and stopped before she can ruin more lives - of people and dogs.

Once upon a recent time the term "cathouse" was a euphemism for "brothel," but today it is understood literally to be a house filled to overflowing with felines and often dogs and other animals, a house whose owner has obviously lost his or her grip on reality. Every community of any size has such animal hellholes, but short of living next door and being assaulted daily by the stench, one usually remains unaware of them until TV news reports the tragic outcome of the latest humane society raid. Heartbreaking footage of animals in such advanced condition of neglect, starvation and disease that they must be destroyed leaves us shaking our heads in impotent despair.

Clearly it is time for a closer look at the animal collecting syndrome, now recognized as symptomatic of an addictive personality, an obsessive-compulsive disorder, or both. What do those in most frequent contact with the problem have to say about it?

A New York State Humane Association fact sheet catalogs some of the traits seen in so-called "animal addicts." Commonly these people exhibit a persecution complex, find ready alibis for their behaviour, neglect their personal condition and that of their property and environment, are clever at attracting sympathy and have friends or "enablers" in their lives who facilitate the unhealthy continuation of their addictive conduct.

Randall Lockwood, a vice president of the Humane Society of the United States who has published articles on the animal collector syndrome, believes that although the pattern has been studied as pathology for only about a decade, such people have probably always been around. According to Lockwood and animal behaviour expert Dennis Fetko, collectors may profess a love for their animals, but are apparently more interested in maintaining control over them than alleviating the suffering brought about by overcrowding and neglect. In fact, say Lockwood and Fetko, the suffering often goes unrecognized by these individuals.

Probably because they are in profound denial that any problem exists, collectors convicted of cruelty and sentenced to counselling are uncooperative in the extreme. Unless they are jailed or closely watched, they are almost certainly emotionally incapable and unwilling to obey court orders to not keep animals for prescribed lengths of time. Recidivism rates are known to be high, with approximately 80 percent of offenders repeating their collecting behaviour.

Additional characteristics of the collector personality are:

Living in clutter. A need not only to have too many animals, but to have an excessive quantity of inanimate objects as well;

Denial that there is anything wrong with a visibly sick animal, with filth and odour, or with cramming dogs and cats in small cages for extended periods without exercise;

Belief that only they can care for or cure their animals' illnesses with secret or unorthodox treatments.

Refusal to release any animals, even when good homes are found, or when terminally ill or injured animals are suffering and require euthanasia;

Secretive home behaviour. Although the collector may present a personable facade and appear outwardly normal, rarely will any friend or acquaintance be permitted to visit his or her residence;

In a fact sheet entitled "Collectors: Kindness Gone Awry," People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals asks that those aware of possible collectors alert humane officials to neglect or abuse, even if the owner seems well intentioned. Since some shelters may actually be run by collectors the organization recommends that individuals investigate carefully before turning an animal over to a humane group or "rescuer," and "accept no excuses for not being allowed inside." A cluttered, dirty, overcrowded environment is not one to which to release any animal.