

East County



Babs Fry at her home in Jamul on Wednesday. To find a dog, you need to think like a dog, she says.

LOST DOG? BABS FRY IS ON IT

Tracker has helped hundreds of families reunite with pets

BY PAM KRAGEN

JAMUL Seven years ago, Babs Fry was devastated when a pregnant terrier mix dog she was fostering at her Jamul ranch disappeared.

Then she got an email from a professional pet tracker offering some unusual dog recovery tips that blew Fry's mind.

"I lost a dog and was very fearful and didn't think anyone would be able to catch her. Then I got a call from this woman and I thought she was crazy. But sure enough, 10 days later that dog was in a trap in my driveway."

That was the beginning of a major life shift for Fry, a longtime Realtor who now dedicates all of her energies to her new nonprofit, A Way Home for Dogs. The organization provides free tracking and recovery advice and services to find lost family dogs, as well as strays.

Since she started training as a tracker and trapper seven years ago, Fry estimates she has helped in the recovery of hundreds, if not thousands, of dogs throughout Southern California and beyond. Her unconventional recovery advice has also been featured on the website of TV's "Dog Whisperer" César Millán and in The New York Post.

Fry jokes that she dedicates "48 hours a day" to dog recovery, fielding up to 50 calls a day from pet owners seeking advice from as far away as Canada, Australia and England. She said she usually juggles about six cases at a time. On Fry's Facebook page (facebook.com/awayhomefordogs), she posts videos and stories of recoveries at least two to three times a week. Peak recovery periods are after Fourth of July and New Year's Eve, when fireworks spook many dogs to bolt.

Rita Rodriguez of Point Loma has been volunteering for Fry for the past four years. She helps care for the strays and rescued animals that Fry is rehabilitating and re-homing and she

sometimes accompanies Fry on tracking missions. She said Fry goes above and beyond to help people, no matter the hours or the financial cost to herself.

"It's not a job for her, it's something she does 24/7. She takes calls in the middle the night," Rodriguez said. "She is very committed to helping these animals. Babs has big, beautiful heart. Her heart is real."

For about 90 percent of the cases she takes on, Fry speaks with pet owners only by phone to create a tailor-made recovery plan for their dog based on its individual breed, temperament, past behavior and how it became lost. For the other 10 percent of cases, Fry goes out in the field herself, often sleeping for days at a time in her truck and using field cameras, ro-tisserie chickens, clothing bearing familiar scents and humane trapping cages to recover dogs. Most of her recovery missions take three to five days, but some can take a month or more.

That was the case one year ago this week for a 1-year-old Vizsla named Penny, who escaped from a boarding facility in Valley Center while her owners, Mike and Mandy Colafrancesco of San Marcos, were out of town on vacation. The Colafrancescos were amazed by Fry's tireless efforts on their behalf and her skill at tracking Penny down after she'd been missing for 34 days. The couple was also frustrated that Fry refused to accept any payment — even a canned drink or gas money — for her services. So instead, the Colafrancescos — Mike is a San Diego Fire captain and Mandy is an ER nurse for Palomar Health — repaid Penny's rescuer by underwriting the cost and filing the paperwork for Fry's new nonprofit (awayhomefordogs.com).

"She is a pretty incredible person but she has a hard time accepting people's generosity," Mike Colafrancesco said. "Our hope is that by having an official nonprofit, she can get donations and have something to build from so she can help others."

Fry said she's driven to track dogs because of her lifelong love for all animals.

"To tell you the truth, I've

always gotten along better with animals than people," Fry said. "I got involved in animal rescue as soon as I was old enough and when I discovered tracking I found out that I have a gift, a passion and a talent."

Fry credits her expertise in dog recovery to two local experts who offered to mentor her and allowed her to shadow them on their missions: Laura Ann Bidinger, who was the pet detective that tracked Fry's terrier mix down, and Mike Noon.

Fry said the most important piece of advice she has for distraught pet owners is to battle their urge to go out searching for their dog. Contacting dog shelters, posting flyers and sharing photos and information on social media can alert an entire community for dog-sightings. Also, driving around looking for a dog will spread the owners' scent around and could confuse a dog.

Fry also discourages people from using techniques they read about online for finding and capturing their dogs. She said chasing after or shouting at a frightened runaway dog could divert it from its journey home, and failing to use a trap cage properly usually ensures that a dog will never enter a cage the second time.

"Typically if it's a human idea, it's a bad idea," Fry said. "We're in fear for our dog's life and we feel guilty that something has happened to them. And by the way, none of that is conducive to making your dog safe."

Fry said that to track and trap a dog successfully, she has learned to think like a dog. Pet dogs will naturally try to make their way home by following a scent, but they travel as the crow flies, not by roads or sidewalks, so searching by car doesn't work. Lost dogs are also caught up in a "fight or flight" mindset, so they're likely to run away from everyone they see, including their owners.

She also urges dog owners not to lose hope. Dogs are animals and possess the instinct to survive, even in fierce storms, desert heat, icy conditions and without easy access to food and water. Predators like coyotes can be dangerous, but Fry

said the longer a dog is lost in the wild, the more survival skills it will learn.

"They won't starve to death. They'll hunt, they'll forage and they'll eat road-kill," she said. "They're not biologically engineered to kick the bucket or die of dehydration."

Colafrancesco said he and his wife were beginning to lose hope of ever seeing Penny again when Fry — who had been posting flyers, following leads and sleeping nights in her truck in Valley Center — picked up video of Penny on a field camera, 28 days after she'd gone missing. Five days later, Fry was able to lure Penny into a trap cage with a blanket inside bearing the scent of the family's other dog, Penny's brother Truman. Penny lost almost half of her body weight during her 34-day odyssey but was otherwise healthy.

"Babs has a sixth sense with animals that is uncanny," Colafrancesco said. "What she does is amazing. Call it a miracle or good fortune, but without Babs' intervention we would not have our dog today."

Although Fry generally works alone fielding calls and doing recoveries, she has a team of about 10 volunteers, including Rodriguez. She also has the support of her husband, Derek Fry, an executive with a helicopter rental company based in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. The Frys own a 22-acre ranch in Texas where someday they hope to open an animal sanctuary. But for now, her focus is entirely on A Way Home for Dogs.

She's grateful to the Colafrancescos for establishing the nonprofit because virtually all of her recovery expenses — including gasoline, cooked chickens and equipment, as well as food and professional training for stray dogs that have suffered trauma — come from her own pocket. With donations, she'll be able to track and recover even more dogs.

"I never had any desire to embark on my own rescue organization independently," she said. "I just wanted to help these dogs and all the people who are missing them."

pam.kragen@sduniontribune.com

EAST COUNTY HAPPENINGS

City councils

El Cajon, 3 p.m. Tuesday; **La Mesa**, 6 p.m. Tuesday; **San-tee**, 6:30 p.m. Wednesday

School boards

Alpine Union School District, 5:15 p.m. Wednesday; **Cajon Valley Union School District** (El Cajon), 5:30 p.m. Tuesday; **Jamul-Dulzura Union School District**, 6:30 p.m. Tuesday; **La Mesa-Spring Valley School District**, 6 p.m. Tuesday; **Lakeside Union Elementary School District**, 6 p.m. Thursday; **Lemon Grove School District**, 6 p.m. Tuesday; **Mountain Empire Unified School District**, 6 p.m. Tuesday

La Mesa holds State of City address

La Mesa residents are invited to tune in to the first City Council meeting of 2022 at 6 p.m. Tuesday for the annual State of the City address. Join Mayor Mark Apostathis at this Zoom webinar or on Facebook Live. Find information about accessing the meeting at <https://bit.ly/3qRGCaT>.

Lemon Grove groups give away toys

Kids Fashion Week Network So-Cal, along with the Lemon Grove Lions Club and Improving Lemon Grove, recently sponsored their second "Lemon Grove Toy Give Away" at 13 Point Brewing Co. in Lemon Grove. More than 400 toys were given away, and Santa also made an appearance. The Lemon Grove Fire Department stopped by to help pass out toys. The toys were collected over the weeks by placing donation boxes in local businesses, where the community could donate toys. Contact Liana Lebaron at (619) 480-1750.

Christmas tree recycling still open

- El Cajon and EDCO are offering holiday tree recycling through Thursday. Place tree inside your green cart. Other tree drop-off locations are: Wells Park, 1153 E. Madison; Renette Park, 935 S. Emerald; and the Public Works Yard, 1060 Vernon. Remove all lights and ornaments from trees. No flocked trees. Visit www.elcagon.gov/EDCOTreeRecycling.
- Lemon Grove residents can recycle their holiday trees through Saturday at Treganza Heritage Park (formerly Civic Center Park). Place your tree in one of the two recycling containers that will be available in the parking lot. Remove tinsel, strands, ornaments and lights. Free to Lemon Grove residents only.

Grossmont College 'tops out' new building

A steel beam was hoisted recently to the top of Grossmont College's new science, math and career technology complex, marking the topping-out ceremony for the \$37.1 million construction project.

The 59,000-square-foot building, spread across twin structures, will expand classroom, lab and office spaces for several programs. Scheduled for completion next spring, the complex will quadruple the space of the Veterans Resource Center and will include a one-stop center for counseling, tutoring and social interaction for the college's student veterans. The new center updates a group of aging buildings to accommodate new technology and other student needs. Phase 1 was completed in 2020, and included the renovation and replacement of Building 31, home to the Administration of Justice program and Child Development Center. The passage of Proposition V, a \$398-million bond measure approved in 2012, is the primary funding source for the construction and remodeling taking place at Grossmont and Cuyamaca colleges. Prop. V has picked up after Proposition R, the construction bond approved by voters in 2002. Other Prop. V projects include a newly opened Ornamental Horticulture Complex and a Student Services building being built at Cuyamaca College. Visit www.gcccd.edu.

Lemon Grove substation seeks vols

The Sheriff's Department's substation in Lemon Grove is looking for East County senior citizens to volunteer as senior patrol members. Qualified volunteers should be at least age 50, be U.S. citizens or legal residents who have applied for citizenship, and have a valid California driver's license and automobile insurance. Volunteers should be able to serve at least six hours a week helping the community. Senior volunteers do daytime patrols of Lemon Grove neighborhoods, business districts and shopping centers. Other duties might include traffic control; checking on homes of vacationing residents; and well-being checks on residents and seniors. Prospective volunteers also must pass a background check, graduate from a two-week Volunteer Patrol Academy course and be physically and emotionally able to perform duties requested. Call (619) 337-2072.

Blood drives

The S.D. Blood Bank hosts these donor opportunities:

- 9:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Friday, **Advance Auto Parts**, 10043 Mission Gorge Road, Santee
- 9 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Jan. 16, **Central Congregational Church**, 8360 Lemon Ave., La Mesa

Those 17 and older, weighing at least 114 pounds and in good health may be eligible to donate blood. Appointments strongly encouraged. Photo ID required. Call (800) 469-7322 or visit SanDiegoBlood-Bank.org.

Send notices to fyi.east@sduniontribune.com at least two weeks before event.

PREP SPORTS

GRANITE HILLS WRESTLER DETERMINED TO PIN DOWN THOSE W'S

BY STEVE BRAND

EL CAJON When talking with or about Granite Hills wrestler Collin Guffey, one theme is repeated over and over: He hates to lose.

Not that it happens very often, as is evident by his success in high school and nationally, but Guffey admits that losing, almost anywhere, is just unacceptable.

Even in the classroom, where the Eagles sophomore carries a weighted 4.8 grade-point average. A 4.0 is an "A," so you get the idea.

"Yes, I hate to lose," said the Eagles sophomore seriously.

"My only two losses this season were at the Tournament of Champions in Reno, and that was pretty upsetting. First, I lost in the semi-finals to the eventual champion (Vacaville's Eric Almarinez), and then I lost to a kid from Poway (Johnny

Lopez) that I'd pinned earlier.

"I wasn't really prepared, but I tried my hardest. I learned that I had to stay focused the entire match and not leave it for the end."

In San Diego County, losing to a wrestler from Poway isn't exactly unique, and there's a pretty good chance he won't get a rematch even though both the Titans and Eagles are in Division II. Through the first 18 matches, where he earned pins in 13 of his 16 victories, Guffey wrestled up at 138 pounds, where he won the Hamada Classic and the Granite Hills Invitational, but the remainder of the season he'll compete at 132.

"Wrestling at 138 helps him understand what he has



Collin Guffey

to do," said Jesse Sheard, now in his fifth year as head coach of the Eagles. "When the county shut down because of COVID last year, Collin traveled to states where he could wrestle, and he also found a way to practice following the guidelines."

"He has a lot of tools, but he just hates to lose."

There's that theme again.

A year ago, as a freshman, Guffey competed at 120. Although he's 5-11, he expects another growth spurt soon.

"By the time I'm a senior I expect to be 6-1 and 170 pounds," said Guffey, noting that his dad, Shawn, who made the state championships while wrestling for Valhalla, is 6 feet tall.

"I wrestled at 138 to get used to it. I've never had trouble dropping weight, and my goal is to win state at 134 (wrestlers get to add 2 pounds at the end of the season)."

Guffey is ranked No. 5 in the state by Trackwrestling, but in a way, that's a guess. Because of the coronavirus, there was no state meet a year ago, which was disappointing to Guffey, who won the section Division II title at 120 pounds in May with a 6-2 decision over Poway's Paul Kelly.

"It was lame (not having a state championship)," said Guffey who was coming off winning the USA National 16-U Folk-Style championship at the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls, the same site where he won the 12-under title four years earlier.

He shrugged off missing out on a chance to possibly win four state championships by recalling how he won that national title.

"I had four easy wins, but the championship match (against Kane Naaktgeboren) was really close," he said. "We went to overtime,

and I got a takedown and suddenly the match was over. It was pretty cool."

"That's what I like about wrestling, it doesn't matter who the opponent is, you have to just do it. I don't watch my opponents during a competition because I figure if I'm ready and focused, I'll do what needs to be done."

He'll get a chance to see where he stands against many of the best in the state when he competes in the Battle for the Belt in Temecula starting Jan. 14.

"It's a good one," said Sheard. "He could get as many as 10 matches. It'll show where he's at for state."

Not that he doesn't do anything else.

Guffey runs on the Granite Hills cross country and track teams sandwiched around wrestling. He was the Eagles' No. 1 runner in cross country and all-league in track as well, but while he

enjoys those sports, his focus remains wrestling.

"Doing cross country and track (800-1600-pole vault) gives me better endurance for wrestling," he said. "It also helps me deal with adversity and pain. And having a good GPA helps me think my way out of situations in wrestling."

"But I love wrestling, it's fun. It's a sport where physical strength might not matter as much as mental will. Determination is a main factor, and while strength and quickness are important, it's good to have that confidence."

"Being on a great team (he's a tri-captain) with my coaches, who have helped me a lot, make it fun. I eventually want to be an NCAA champion and being in the Olympics would be amazing. But right now, I want that state title."

Steve Brand is a freelance writer.