



Babs Fry

A WAY HOME FOR DOGS

By Judith A. Habert

Photos Courtesy of Babs Fry

Babs Fry is probably one of the most incredible women I have ever met. She has a passion for life, and it is not only unique but a Godsend to so many San Diegans. Babs is lovingly referred to as “The Pet Detective”, and as you will find out, she has rightfully earned this title.

Born in New Jersey. “My family left Jersey when I was three although I have been told that the Yankee tendencies have not left me, and I would tend to agree with that statement.” Babs’ father served in the Navy, but luckily, in a position where they were not made to move around as frequently as most military families. He was stationed in Jacksonville, Florida, before he deployed overseas to Naples, Italy. So, Babs spent most of her formative years in Italy, and this is where she truly calls home. “I moved there when I was 12, graduated high school there, and it was very definitely my formative years. My dad was one that really believed that we were there to immerse ourselves into the culture, not to be Americans in Italy.”

Babs attended an American high school, but all her close friends were Italian. When she graduated high school, she went to Florida State, where she graduated with two degrees, one in Criminology and the other in Communications. Howev-

er, after graduation, she found her passion in finance.

“I did a lot of management training and managed branches for a secondary lender before meeting my husband who coincidentally happened to be Navy, despite my strong commitment that I would never marry anybody in the military.” But the heart wants what the heart wants, and so they were engaged, and shortly thereafter, in 1999, he was stationed here, and they have called San Diego home ever since.

So, what has led Babs to the career she currently loves? “I have always gotten along better with animals than people. From the time I was a little girl, I used to bring home all sorts of things in my pockets, I would skip kindergarten to go catch tadpoles and hide them in my closet. As I got older, I was always catching strays and bringing them home with me.”

Luckily, Babs’s hubby is an animal lover as well. Over the years, they acquired quite a large number of dogs through their early relationship. “When these beloved pets started to pass away from old age, we started looking for new family members. As a result, we ended up connecting with the rescue community.”

Through several years of extensive involvement with one of the larger Southern California rescues - fostering, management support of their medical, and mentoring their fosters - Babs became the go-to for

their most fearful and sometimes problematic dogs, whether it be medically or behaviorally. Along that journey, she lost one and admittedly did what she currently tells clients never to do when a dog goes missing, but at the time, she didn’t know better. “I spent a day and a half panicking, making really dumb decisions and making serious mistakes. I had at the time, without knowing it, a lot of ignorance that manifested itself in arrogance because I was the go-to for this type of animal. So, I knew there was no way that dog was coming to me or anybody else who offered to help find her. A day and a half later, I was desperate and panicked, so I engaged in a phone call with a lady who, at that time, was considered an expert in finding lost animals. I followed her instructions to the T, and a dog that was scared of being touched and had been at my house for only 12 hours when it disappeared, was spotted about a mile and a half away and ten days later was safe in a trap in my driveway. It was then I realized that the way most people handle lost animals makes it very likely that they will remain lost.”

This one event led Babs down a path that would make her the ultimate “Pet Detective,” and she is now known as the expert in getting our beloved pets back if they go missing. Babs admits that this is not an area that you just dabble in. “Getting to be an expert in this area requires a certain amount of



commitment, tenacity, compromise, and sacrifice. You don’t just show up for a couple of hours, and when the pet isn’t recovered, you say Oh well, that didn’t work out. I hope that dog is okay. You have to stick with it until it comes to fruition. One way or the other. I learned inadvertently that I had not just a passion but a talent, and over the course of the last several years, I have worked at perfecting my craft and learning from others with more experience than

me, and I have made it my full-time commitment.”

I asked Babs if there is a list of things to do when your dog goes missing. Her response was, “Call me! There is no black-and-white list I can provide because there are so many variables. When I know the circumstances, I can give the absolute method, but it varies based on many factors. You must remember that you are talking about dogs that are living thinking beings. Humans that are living, thinking beings, and both of whom have opposite instinctual reactions when a dog goes missing. The fact of the matter is, it’s a recipe. When did it happen? Where did it happen? Why did it happen? How long has the dog been with you? The reason I insist on people connecting with me is because, first, I have to get people on board with a different way of thinking that aligns with dog behavior versus people’s panicked behavior. Then the other piece of that is every dog is going to have different variables that are either going to be aversive or attractive and those are the things we have to navigate so that we can negotiate what our next steps are going to be. Generally speaking, the very first thing people need to do is stop searching. Searching is the worst thing people can do.”

As Babs explains, “Search and hunt are synonymous terms, and if you have a friendly, gregarious, happy-go-lucky dog, you wouldn’t be calling me, and you would have your dog back, it either would’ve stopped and come back or somebody else would have found it.



That’s a fact. And if searching for a dog was going to be productive, I would tell people to do that. But a findable dog has already been found by somebody else. You’re wasting your time and you’re connecting with half a dozen people as you’re walking the neighborhood versus hundreds or thousands managing a more effective campaign through social media and posters. The flip side of that is that something has triggered flight in the dog. Their absolute raw instinctual nature is

fight or flight, fly or die. It’s a very black-and-white line. There are no gray areas. Because in their world, gray areas or mistakes are deadly.”

As Babs mentioned If you haven’t had your pet since birth, you have no way to know what experiences may cause this fight or flight reaction. It could be something like a dirt bike that he has never seen before, or he witnessed a car accident that triggered that life-or-death decision. Every dog is going to have an instinctual reaction at some point, and you cannot train instinct out of a dog.



Babs emphasized that this is the reason that she personally never advocates for off-leash activities for your dog. What people don’t take into account when doing so is that you are operating in an uncon-

trolled setting with unpredictable variables. The fact of the matter is if a dog feels that their life is in danger, whether it be something they smell in the wind, a sound that they hear, something they see, or an energy that we don’t pick up on, that fight or flight reaction could come on instantaneously.

The most important fact that I learned from Babs is that what you think you should do is probably the least likely step to finding your dog. Like with people, every dog is different, and the solution to recovering them is different as well. Babs shares, “I can tell you what not to do. You don’t look for your dog. You don’t rely solely on social media, and most importantly, you have to connect with somebody, be it me or another expert, at recovering pets to get yourself dialed in with your recipe. You know, you wouldn’t just dabble with chemistry to see how it turned out. You would consult a chemist.”

Babs adds that she is a trapper by trade. That is one of her gifts that has brought lost pets home to their loving families. I know from having had a dog disappear that there is no more joy than being reunited with a beloved pet that you feared you would never see again. Thankfully, with Babs’s immense knowledge and trapper skills, she has brought tears of joy to the eyes of many pet owners who have been reunited with their missing family members.

I asked Babs what was the longest period of time that a dog was missing and then recovered. “There was a dog spotted in the San Diego County riverbed that had been there for three and a half years,” I asked if she had been working with the owner for that amount of time. “I actually worked with that owner when the dog went missing. I worked with him for a couple of weeks. The dog went MIA, we had no leads, nothing that we could do, but when I got a call from a ranger about a dog that was incredibly fearful and had been reported to



be seen repeatedly by the homeless community I responded and we set a trap thinking it was just a stray but I started doing homework to identify if there might be somebody out there looking for the dog. This particular dog had some anomalies to it, like where it was and its color. And it happened to be a neutered male, but not microchipped, which is a little odd.”

Babs called the owner, asking questions but being very cautious about how she did so because the last thing she wanted to do, three and a half years later, was to put the owner on a rollercoaster ride, making them think that their dog might still be alive. “In the course of that discussion, some things came up, and I realized that it was undeniably GRIM.” I can only imagine the joy of being reunited with their pet after so much time had passed.

Often, after a few days, owners will give up the hope that they will ever be reunited with their dogs, and they may fear that their dog has been stolen and will never be returned to them, but Babs adds, “The fact of the matter is that this is rarely the case. But if you don’t keep your momentum and you don’t trust the process and you don’t get the guidance to remain optimistic and hopeful, you will reasonably quit on your dog

without meaning to, and your dog will be left out there not dead but fending for itself.”

Since Babs is often called upon when stray dogs are found, she will take them into her facility and work on getting them adopted if not claimed through the shelter process. “These dogs become part of our rescue. We don’t get a lot of foster support because most of them need extra special handling. We have a kennel license and run a facility at our home. We’ve got 70 dogs. All of them are, for the most part, on-site. And we are completely volunteer based. So, we have people that come to our kennel and help care for the animals. This is kind of ground zero for everybody. It’s where they start their learning curve that, first and foremost, containment is not deadly. A lot of aggression you see in dogs has to do with taking away that flight response. Whether it is a leash or a kennel, whether it is walls or a fence. Every dog has different parameters. When they get here, they get to decompress and kind of start to experience a new normal with consistency and predictability. Then they start to experience strangers and humans on different levels depending on where they are, what they’re prepared for, and what their past is and so forth and so on. And then through that experience,

they then graduate out into going into the world in controlled settings with people they know and dogs that they’re comfortable with, and we do pack walks and adoption events so that they can start to learn that life is okay.” This can be a timely process, as most of the dogs stay with Babs for several months to a year before they graduate and are ready to go into forever homes.

When Babs first started rescuing dogs and taking them into her home rescue, she admits that it was tough for her to let any of them go. Babs shares, “I have had to grow almost as much as my dogs through this process. Another tidbit about me personally is that I’m going on sixteen and a half years clean and sober. Truthfully, these animals are my spiritual connection. I am convinced to this day that God has put this path in my journey, not just to keep me clean and sober, but more specifically because he knows my people skills still need some work, and while I have always been the ‘I don’t give a damn what you think kind of gal,’ the reality is when you are that way, you alienate people. If I do so, then I can’t help dogs. So ultimately, I am a work in progress, and I get to watch these dogs grow, and I embrace educating people, welcome help and get these dogs more by doing so.”

Babs and her adorable dogs can be found every single Sunday from 10-3 at Point Loma High School where many of her rescues are available for adoption. “I park my van, and we can load and unload the dogs, giving them a place to escape to if they are overwhelmed by either the people or the weather. What I tell people when they come to our events, and we’re doing the orientation for handlers is that it’s not just about the rehoming. A lot of times, our

events are as much part of their rehab so they can be rehomed. So that they can learn life experience in a safe environment.” Right now, in addition, Babs now has 30 to 35 volunteers that come on-site to cover seven daily rotations of 8 AM to noon and 6:30 PM to 9:30 PM. Babs is looking for more volunteers to help care for her rescues. “We always need more help than we get, and we want to make sure that these dogs are properly cared for and played with so they can get over their trauma and just enjoy their newfound lives.”

One last point that I touched upon with Babs was what we should do if we come upon a lost dog because, let’s face it, it could be your dog, and you would hope that someone would do what they could to keep it safe and bring it back to its family. “There are three things to do if you come upon a stray dog. You stop, you ignore, and you report. Because if you stop and you ignore, and that dog is not scared, it’s going to come running right up to you. And then you can find its mommy. But if it doesn’t, the minute you go into, I have to catch the dog mode. You have hit his go button, and that dog will dash off and could possibly do so into oncoming traffic. The dog will no longer be watching for danger, it will view you as the danger and can often end up getting hit by a car in an effort to get away from you.”

We are so thankful to have met such a wonderful woman with such a huge heart who was kind enough to share what she does with our readers. She has dedicated her life to helping dogs find their way home and is not financially benefiting from her expertise. She truly has an amazing heart and is dedicated to saving our animals. Thank you, Babs, for all you do!



Should you have a dog go missing or find a stray dog, before doing anything else please get in touch with Babs Fry at:

A Way Home for Dogs • 619-249-2221

Visit her website at <https://www.awayhomefordogs.com/>
To Learn More and Help Support Her Rescue.