

T H E

# Latham Letter

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PROMOTING RESPECT FOR ALL LIFE THROUGH EDUCATION

## From Street Dog to Canine Artist: The Dog Who Changed My Life

By Deirdre Rand, Ph.D.

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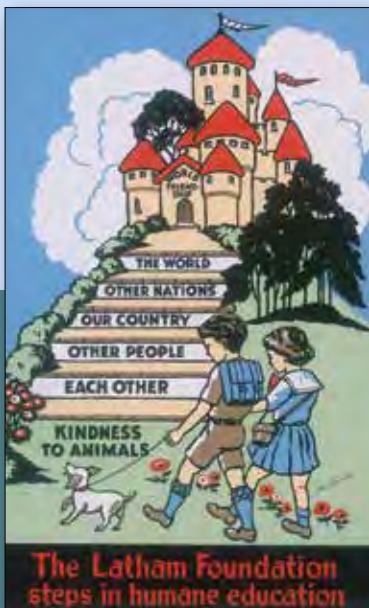
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# MANDATE

## Edith Latham's **MANDATE:**

"To promote, foster,  
encourage and  
further the  
principles of  
humaneness,  
kindness and  
benevolence to  
all living creatures."



### *The Latham Letter*

Balanced perspectives on humane issues and activities

Search the *Latham Letter* archives by topic and learn more about all of our resources and grants at [www.Latham.org](http://www.Latham.org) or call 510-521-0920.



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# The Latham Letter

Volume XLI, Number 1, Winter 2020

## BALANCED PERSPECTIVES ON HUMANE ISSUES AND ACTIVITIES



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education.

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# From Street Dog to Canine Artist: The Dog Who Changed My Life

By Deirdre Rand, Ph.D.

## INTRODUCTION

By Carol Novello, author of *Mutual Rescue: How Adopting a Homeless Animal Can Save You, Too* (reviewed in the Fall 2019 *Latham Letter*, pp 20-21)

Awe. Wonder. Joy. What is it about the human-animal bond that evokes such powerful emotions? Perhaps it is the sheer improbability that sentient beings with four legs and a tail can come to trust us, love us and weave their way into our lives in unexpected ways.

The story of Deirdre Rand and her Australian Cattle Dog Bella is overflowing with awe, wonder, and joy. Awe at the power of their bond that Deirdre nurtured by training Bella so she could thrive in the world and express her artistic potential to the fullest. Wonder that the form of art Bella engages in has a communicative element which is understandable to the humans in her life. Joy in the way Bella and her constructions have transformed Deirdre's life,

a joy Deirdre and Bella might not have experienced were it not for their relationship.

A recent post on Pinterest read, "Rescue doesn't mean 'damaged,' it means let down by humans." From that perspective, aren't we all rescues in some way or another? There are many aspects of Deirdre and Bella's story that I find inspiring but perhaps none more so than the aspect of "mutual rescue." Deirdre's work to further improve the relationships between animals and humans speaks to the power of love to expand our sense of purpose and make the world a better place for all living beings.

As you read their story, I hope you'll be as moved as I am by how much more full and rich life can be when we share it with members of another species. And that you will come to experience—if you haven't already—the special kind of restorative grace that comes from adopting and caring for a homeless animal.



## How it All Began

The story I'd like to share with you begins with the rescue of an Australian Cattle Dog named Bella. She was picked up as a stray in California's Central Valley. When no one claimed Bella after several weeks, the shelter released her to Cattle Dog Rescue in the San Francisco Bay Area to improve her prospects of being adopted into a good home. Around this time, my husband and I were looking to adopt a young female Cattle Dog to join our family as a second dog.

The Cattle Dog Rescue folks had us on their list and let us know they were picking up a “pretty little female” at a shelter. They promised to send us a picture as soon as they got her home.



As soon as we saw Bella’s picture, we dropped what we were doing and drove to the couple’s home, hoping we’d get there before anyone else could adopt her.

Bella was a beautiful dog with a sweet disposition and she could hardly contain her excitement at meeting us. We got Charro, our elderly male Cattle Dog, out of our car and put the dogs in the rescuers’ yard where they explored the perimeter together. While conversing about Bella, my husband and I agreed, “She’s going to be the most intelligent Cattle Dog we’ve ever had!” Little did we know that this flash of intuition was going to manifest as a rare form of canine artistic behavior.

### *Adjusting to Her New Home*

Bella and Charro were both very friendly with people. The difference was that Charro had been well trained when we adopted him and he knew how to behave. Bella

was nine months old and well into adolescence. She was accustomed to running free and had absolutely no manners. She jumped up on people in her excitement to greet them, barked hysterically at the sight of other dogs, and resisted training. I decided to seek the help of a professional.

Bella and I began working with a master trainer named Paul Miller who had a great deal of experience with Australian Cattle Dogs (ACDs). [www.bayk9.com](http://www.bayk9.com) According to him, Bella was not a “heeler” even though she looked like one. Most ACDs are heelers who

drive animals from behind, nipping at their heels. But Paul identified Bella as a “header,” which is the name for herding dogs who gather the herd and control the animals from the front. He explained, “As a header, Bella wants to lead and be first. That is her nature.”

Once home, Bella’s instincts as a header conflicted with Charro’s leadership role as a dominant male. She insisted on herding Charro, which annoyed him and prompted him to put Bella in her place. We had to teach Bella to stop pestering Charro. Luckily, Charro was a naturally benevolent leader and Bella accept her subordinate role. With that, the dogs enjoyed spending time together, much as they had on adoption day.

Paul introduced Bella to Frisbee as an alternative outlet for her instincts as a header. Bella loved the game and added to the fun by catching the Frisbee, then throwing it in the air herself so she could catch it a second time.





## The Emergence of Bella's Artistic Talent

Soon after Bella came to live with us, a friend gave her a pink baby blanket. Struck by the number of creative ways Bella came up with to use something so simple, I wrote a little ditty about it.

*Bella's blanky is soft and pink:  
Chew it, tear it, shake that thing!*

*Drag it, pull it, throw it in the air,*

*Catch it on your tail and a flag will flair. Make it a pillow, make it a tent, Bella's ideas are never spent.*



Bella and I continued working intensively with Paul. It was exciting for me to be learning so much about dogs and their relationships with humans and each other. He provided Bella with a variety of toys including three-foot braids, furry stuffed animals, and plush balls. Friends supplemented these toys with an all-cotton rope toy and a hand-made rag doll. Bella continually created new ways to utilize her toys through exploratory play. She maximized the physical pleasure of this play by doing things such as rolling around on

the braids, using a plush ball as a pillow, and vigorously shaking the rag doll.

## Was something unusual going on?

I felt I was seeing something out of the ordinary but I didn't know exactly what it was. I bought a small camera in the hopes that photographs would reveal something. Sure enough, with the passage of time, there was a break through. Bella began making shapes such as circles, loops, elegantly curved lines, and right angles. There was growing evidence that Bella's creations were intentional.

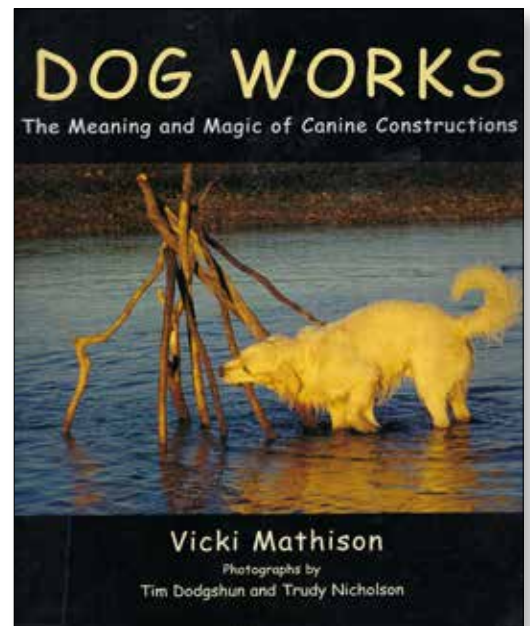
Bella's next phase involved gathering a group of toys and using them to make a construction, like the triangle the size of the living room rug which appeared in a 2011 issue of *Bark Magazine*. Remember what I said earlier about Bella being a header, *i.e.* a dog who gathers the herd together? It seems likely that Bella's characteristics as a header contributed to her interest in making constructions.

I began searching for reports of other dogs who engaged in this type of behavior. I discovered the book *Dog Works: The Meaning and Magic of Canine Constructions* (Mathison, 2000).

This was the book that inspired me to call Bella's



designs "constructions." My excitement grew even more when I found that National Geographic Television had produced a special on canine intelligence in 2008 that featured a rescued Doberman named Donnie. There is a fascinating video on the Internet of Donnie making his constructions. [youtube.com/watch?v=o1fgUQSSihk](http://youtube.com/watch?v=o1fgUQSSihk) blog: [thetruthaboutcatsdogs.blogspot.com/2007/12/donnie-doberman.html](http://thetruthaboutcatsdogs.blogspot.com/2007/12/donnie-doberman.html)







## Bella's Canine Constructions

After photographing Bella and her constructions for a year I decided to create a website which I called “Bella’s Canine Constructions.” Its purpose was to share Bella’s gift as a canine artist with others, and to show the rewards of adopting a homeless animal. The website was full of photos and slideshows. It also featured two kinds of Blog entries: Blog entries about Bella and her constructions and Blog entries about giving animals better lives through rescue and adoption. You can find the Blog entries from Bella’s original website in the archives of her new and updated website.

## My Transformation to Animal-Assisted Therapy

In 2011, I was doing a Google search for other animals who do constructions when I came across an article called “Four Legged Therapist” by Lois Abrams, Ph.D. on her Guidance Facilitators website. In it Lois described her mission as “promoting awareness of animals as natural healers.” Those words really resonated with me and **I decided to pursue a similar mission, by creating an online continuing education course on Animal-Assisted Therapy.** I was collecting material for the course when I discovered *The Latham Letter*, which was a rich source of information.

There were a number of articles by and about Dr. Aline Kidd and her husband, the Reverend Robert Kidd.

Coincidentally, Aline had been the supervisor of my clinical internship in psychology and Rob had performed our wedding ceremony. The Kidds had a pair of Australian Cattle Dogs who were having puppies. They gave us pick of the litter as a wedding present and thus began our love for and appreciation of the breed – from that first female, Tasha, through Enzo, Bella, and Charro.

We invite you to visit Bella's website which poses thought-provoking questions and features color photographs of constructions by Bella and her boyfriend Enzo, who learned from Bella how to make constructions himself.

<https://www.bellacanineconstructions.com/index.html>  
(also by Dr. Rand)





## Online Continuing Education Course on Animal-Assisted Therapy and the Healing Power of Pets

### Mission Statement

Through Inspiration & Education I hope to achieve the following:

- Increase awareness of the healing power of pets,
- Encourage mental health professionals, teachers, social workers, and other helping professionals incorporate animals into their work,
- Enrich the bond that people have with their companion animals,

- Inspire people to bring joy & comfort to others by volunteering with their pets,
- Help save adoptable dogs and cats from euthanasia, and
- Share the love and joy that animals have brought into my own life.

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### Information on Dr. Rand's continuing education course

<https://www.pdresources.org/course/index/1/1254/Animal-Assisted-Therapy-and-the-Healing-Power-of-Pets>

<https://www.animalsasnaturalhealers.com>

Or contact Dr. Rand at:  
[dcr@docrand.com](mailto:dcr@docrand.com)

# QUIZ

What percentage of Americans report that they sleep with their pets?

Answer: page 23

