

87-year-old Newfane man has rehabilitated more than 4,000 birds

WILLIAMSVILLE, Vt. (WCAX) - A licensed bird rehabilitator in Newfane has spent more than four decades healing injured birds, driven by a childhood memory that shaped his life's work.

As stories go, this one stands out...

There's Jasper, the crow, who didn't enjoy this reporter's company. And then there's Stella, the blind-in-one-eye Barred owl, who has been a fixture in Fred Homer's kitchen for years.

"I think our kids grew up thinking every kitchen has an owl," Homer said.

His wife, Debbie Fiener, is okay with Stella... for the most part.

"It's springtime in Vermont, and the rivers running free. There's no place else on earth that I was born to be," Homer sings.

That place is Williamsville, a hamlet in the southern Vermont town of Newfane.

"I love interacting with the land," Homer said. And wasting time could be a cardinal sin.

Reporter Joe Carroll: You don't believe in the afterlife...

Fred Homer: That's true.

Reporter Joe Carroll: Does that make life even more special?

Fred Homer: Absolutely... And there's the emotional part, "Ah s---, this is too good a ride."

"He's sort of a Renaissance man," Fiener said.

From sugaring to writing... And for over four decades, the former teacher has spent much of his time in the barn. The 87-year-old is a licensed bird rehabilitator. He's been healing birds for as long as they've lived here, 42 years.

Reporter Joe Carroll: Why do this?

Fred Homer: Why? Good question.

The answer goes back 80 years, to a hay wagon in New Jersey. “We were going down the road, and there was an injured bird in the road, and I was climbing out of the wagon to help,” Homer said. He and his family were at a day camp when young Fred made the move. An employee got his feathers ruffled. “‘Don’t you dare get out.’ And I just... The wagon pulled away, and that little bird was just sitting in the road, and I just, my heart went out.”

Homer has attempted to save over 4,000 birds. But sadly, not every one can be saved. “Injured birds seem to invoke and promote the best in people,” he said.

Homer built his own coffin 20 years ago as a daily reminder that life is precious. “I walk past my coffin every single day and I say, ‘Fred, exploit this day and don’t let it slip by and don’t be grumpy,’” he said.

Reporter Joe Carroll: So you’d be happy if this collects dust for the next 20 years or so.

Fred Homer: That would be fine with me.

Homer says Jasper the crow was distressed when he first arrived. He believes Jasper will soon be strong enough to be released.

Reporter Joe Carroll: He’s getting used to me, I think.

Fred Homer: I think so, too.

For Homer and his wife, Williamsville is his “heaven on earth.”

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