

THE LOCAL REPORTER

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Sanctuary Lane is the road leading to where Beautiful Together Animal Sanctuary is currently being built. Photo courtesy of Beautiful Together.

By **Michelle Cassell**

Managing Editor

Orange County – There’s a road less traveled in Chapel Hill, paved with 100 million tons of rock, leading to 83 acres of what is becoming a healing sanctuary for animals and youth. It is the evolution of a vision shared by Tamara and Steve Lackey to connect animals needing refuge with children living in foster care or in at-risk situations.

This is the future home of **Beautiful Together**, a 501(c)(3) non-profit established in 2016. Their goal: To connect the vulnerable and the voiceless in purposeful ways that benefit us all.

Executive Director of Beautiful Together Tamara Lackey said, “When we acquired this property in October 2020, I wrote an essay about our plans to the property owners. When they accepted our offer they said they felt that it was a great tribute to their dad, who would have loved knowing that this land would become a place to rescue dogs. I was amazed to get 83 acres when we initially looked at ten. My more practical husband was terrified!”

Two and a half years later, the couple has converted the former dairy farmland with chest-high wild grasses to a welcoming destination.

Chapel Hill residents may recognize the Lackey name as the owners of Coco Bistro, a popular Chapel Hill eatery. The plant-based eco-friendly restaurant donates 10% of its proceeds to Beautiful Together.

The land was not a donation. Lackey said they used all of what would have been their retirement funds to purchase it.

How and why did they take on this project?

Two of the family’s children are adopted, one from Ethiopia and one from Ecuador. While traveling back and forth to Africa, they realized how sizeable the orphan population was and decided to take on projects to improve the children’s lives.

“It struck us that we could do one tangible effort after another,” Lackey said.

They started by renovating the orphanage bathrooms, creating a nutrition program, and making a safe outdoor area for play. These projects were the foundation of Beautiful Together.

Since 2014, the Lackeys have focused on supporting children waiting for adoption in Africa and the United States. During the last eight years, they have completed over 20 projects, including a Safe Showers project for homeless youth aging out of foster care in North Carolina.

Beautiful Together has rescued over 2200 homeless and abused animals in North Carolina since 2021.

Pet therapy was not the original intention of the sanctuary, but they repeatedly witnessed the incredible therapeutic connection that children make with animals.

Lackey's inspiration to build a bridge between two vulnerable populations – children and animals came while observing children on the streets of Ethiopia, often huddling with puppies. Her observations and the behavioral science research she studied concur that children connect with animals for comfort and emotional support, especially after experiencing trauma. The same is true for the animals that have been abandoned and isolated in shelters.



Ethiopian children huddle together and with a puppy on the city streets for warmth and comfort. Photo by Tamara Lackey.

“We are eternally grateful to amazing rescue organizations such as Beautiful Together Animal Sanctuary. They make a world of difference by supporting our animal shelter and we are so happy to have Beautiful Together as part of our community here in Chapel Hill,” said Tenille Fox, spokesperson for Orange County Animal Services.

Beautiful Together today

At this interview in July, Tamara Lackey was a few hours from boarding a plane to Africa. The first part of the trip pays her bills in her position as a Nikon ambassador doing commercial shoots in Kenya and Uganda. The second part will involve returning to the orphanage they have worked with since 2014 in Ethiopia, with a psychotherapist who focuses on trauma, loss and fear.

“The therapist will conduct group and one-on-one sessions and train coordinators,” Lackey said. “It’s an effort to build something I would love to build on over time.”

Construction and improvements at the sanctuary are ongoing. Beautiful Together has a core team of 23 members with an additional 600+ volunteers offering to help.

They also employ two full-time veterinarians, directors of dog and cat rescue operations, a director of youth programming, a build operations director, a build team, and a dog rescue and adoption manager.

The staff also incorporates a clinic coordinator, an administrative manager, a dog adoption coordinator, a transition manager, an events manager, and a legal consultant.

The new Events and Education Pavilion hosts animal foster training programs and provides shelter for academic enrichment field trips. Animal foster training is for individuals who want to help care for and rehabilitate rescued cats or dogs until they can be adopted.

Beautiful Together depends on a network of foster homes for rescued animals throughout North Carolina. When construction is completed on a refuge building, they will be able to house rescued animals and rehabilitate them before they are fostered or adopted.



Lilo, one hour before euthanasia, was rescued by Beautiful Together volunteers from a North Carolina animal shelter. (next screen) Lilo safe and happy in her new home. Photo courtesy of Beautiful Together.

Dr. Eve Boggs started out as a volunteer last Fall, and now is working as a rescue veterinarian for Beautiful Together. “I am excited that we will be moving out of our leased clinic in Carrboro and into a tiny home on the property that will serve as a clinic. One day we expect to have a full-service, fully operational veterinary hospital on the sanctuary site.”

Dr. Boggs and Dr. Kylie Daube run five clinics weekly. Foster animal volunteers can bring their animals in for vaccinations and minor medical treatments. “We plan to start doing more in-depth procedures, like neutering and surgical procedures at our clinic in the sanctuary by mid-August,” said Boggs, a veterinarian in private practice for 20 years before joining Beautiful Together.

“Working as a rescue veterinarian changed my whole mindset about my career. I was ready to get out of veterinary medicine. This makes me excited to get to do what I do. It is a gift to me.” said Boggs.



Construction of the sanctuary buildings is underway. Photo courtesy of Beautiful Together.

The organization has completed civil engineering, cleared and prepared the land, tested soil and water, designed and developed the initial infrastructure, removed, built, and received town approval for their new road's official name – Sanctuary Lane.

Youth programs

Beautiful Together is working with children and completed a pilot program with the Hargraves Center in Chapel Hill. Leslie Davis, youth program director, coordinated the project. “It was a great success and a wonderful experience for the children that attended,” John French, Hargraves Center Supervisor, said.

Davis has strong ties to UNC athletics, over 20 years of youth counseling experience, and has supported the Hargraves Community Center in a volunteer capacity for many years.

Beautiful Together's Academic Enrichment pilot program in April involved children in first to fourth grade from Northside Elementary attending Hargraves after-school care. The children read to puppies and hiked around the property. The staff veterinarians showed the children the clinic and talked about what they do.

Lackey plans a grand opening at the beginning of September. “We will invite children to bring their stuffed animals that need repair, then give the toys little hospital bands to bring them into the experience of the clinic and the sanctuary,” she said.

This October, Beautiful Together plans to start unstructured outdoor play programs for youth based on programs developed by TimberNook. These programs are 100% outdoor and offer over 500 courses.

Lackey said they have applied for several grants and are currently in the middle of their capital campaign. Fundraising for their 10-year \$8,450,000 goal is a major part of her job.

“We always are looking for volunteers to foster our rescued animals,” Lackey said. Beautiful Together’s website has online forms for anyone interested in helping or providing monetary support.