Interview with Sara (pseudonym) – animal rescue charity founder

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Researcher = [K]

**K:** To start off could you tell me how [Sanctuary name] came about, I know you were a horse rescue to begin with, could you tell me how you moved on to pigs?

**P:** My landlord moved me from the house I lived in which didn't have very large outdoor premises, to where I am now and about two weeks after he moved me, some people turned up with erm, a breeding pair of Vietnamese pot belly pigs and their five babies, two sheep and three geese. They said "you're the lady who rescues animals".

**K:** Oh wow, well not pigs at the time!

**P:** Well that's how it started, it was, and actually having seen a pig man in Berkshire have his leg removed by a boar, I was not exactly unafraid of pigs.

**K:** Yeah, I can imagine! Were those pigs previously pets or?

**P:** Er, yeah. They had bought them because the Vietnamese pot belly pig, was the guy who started it all off. He was a small, compact, basically friendly pig, that people decided to make into pets. The couple who brought those here had deliberately bred them and then decided to move and couldn't move all their animals with them. So literally dumped them on me.

**K:** Yes, that seems to be quite a common story that I'm hearing from other rescues, that people just dump them on sanctuaries. Could you tell me when you noticed pet pigs were becoming more popular?

**P:** Right from that minute on, because remember that was very early days because what I did then I wouldn't do now. I did sell the resulting litter that was here off, erm and the female was pregnant again and I sold some of those off and kept some, and at that point we have vasectomised the boar. So, you know, there was great discussion upon whether we implanted an anti-pregnancy thing into the female pig, that would have been done every month, we decided we'd have a very angry female pig. And my vet said "well there's no reason not to vasectomise the boar". So we did.

**K:** Mm, yeah it seems like quite a sensible option. You said you probably wouldn't do that now, could you tell me why?

**P:** I wouldn't sell piglets now, no, absolutely no way.

**K:** Could you tell me why that is?

**P:** Because of the state most of the ones who come in here are in. They've been kept in houses and they're.. you know the first thing a new pig does when it arrives here is dive into it's straw bed and hide itself, which is a natural thing for a pig to do. Cover. That's the first thing all of them do, no matter what age they are, erm, we tend not to lay the bed out. If we've got a new pig coming, we'll leave a pile of straw in the corner and they just dive into it.

**K:** I bet, yeah, I bet they like arriving to that.

**P:** It's sort of like "thank god! This is a proper pig bed".

**K:** Yeah and I guess they don't have that in a house or something.

**P:** No, and I mean they're put in dog crates or dog beds, and fed morsels from the table and unsuitable food. I mean people have actually said "oh it will even eat a ham sandwich!"

**K:** Oh, that's not good, it must be very difficult to see people that are educated about it and are taking on these animals. Could you tell me about the rescue's attitude towards pet pigs in general?

**P:** Most people think that you're mad to take them in, but my question is what happens to them if we don't take them in? I mean, some of ours come from the likes of trading standards, because they're responsible for farm animal welfare. Erm, they've come across pigs that are in, not just houses, but in totally unsuitable accommodation. They sort of say, well look its the abattoir or we'll try and help it. We've had a few pigs come in through trading standards.

**K:** And is that because members of the public or neighbours have reported them?

**P:** Yep, absolutely

**K:** Yeah, I've heard a lot about neighbours reporting people with pig for smell and noise, are there any other reasons do you think?

**P:** I mean if you keep a pig clean, clean up its poo and pee effectively, they don't smell. I mean you wouldn't walk on to this yard, which at the present time, has eleven pigs on it, you wouldn't know immediately we had any pigs.

**K:** Really? That is clean! Could you tell me if you've seen any trends in pet pigs over the years, I don't know when did the sanctuary start?

**P:** When did the Vietnamese start being the pet, oh er, who's that famous good looking actor? George Clooney!

**K:** Oh yeah, he had one.

**P:** Erm, started a trend for the Vietnamese Pot Bellied pig and he lost girlfriends because they didn't want to share a bedroom with the pig! Evidently, so I'm told. Then we started to get the New Zealand Kune Kune pig. Again, a bigger pig, but very, very friendly. We've got one of those, we had two but one died, brothers. They became the trend. Then at the same time, people were using the Vietnamese to breed down and get the so-called micro-pigs. Micro-pigs simply do not exist. The smallest pig we've ever had and still have now, is an Iron Age cross something, and she is the smallest pig we've ever had and she never claimed to be a micro-pig

**K:** Really?

**P:** We have a very small pig at the moment, but she will grow to be normal size. One of the awful things about it, we've had two whose bodies have outgrown their legs so they literally couldn't walk.

**K:** Yes, there's a lot of breeding issues.

**P:** Yeah, terrible breathing issues, growth issues. So we've had to actually physically put two to sleep because we don't keep animals who are in distress.

**K:** Yeah of course, that must be really difficult.

**P:** Oh, it's horrible, but you know, I'm not a bunny hugger. I know when to make a decision when it needs to be made.

**K:** Hard decisions to make, I'm sure. Erm could you tell me about the main challenges that a pet pig owner might face?

**P:** Obesity, not themselves, but their pigs! Disposal of waste, chewing. We've had them been told of you know, the pigs that are being kept almost exclusively in the house, will start on the wallpaper, the wiring, they will chew because they're bored.

**K:** Seems like it. Do you think it's possible to allow enough natural behaviour and social behaviour in an environment in an urban area, for example, in a house or a flat?

**P:** I would say definitely not. Pigs are herd animals, they need to be with other pigs, and even if you have two, unless you have a really good outside area you shouldn't even be contemplating it. They don't take naturally to living indoors, they don't like it.

**K:** Unfortunately, there seems to be a lot of people who seem to think that keeping a pig indoors is perfectly fine.

**P:** I know, because they appear to be fine until they grow up and start to get obese and really overgrown feet, respiratory problems because it's not the right environment for them. That takes you right back to the fact that the government, DEFRA, are handing out holding numbers to people.

**K:** And how do you think DEFRA could approach that issue?

**P:** They should just stop doing it. They should simply say, unless you have an outside area and give a measurement, a large measurement, then we cannot give you a holding number.

**K:** Yeah, that does seem like a sensible approach.

**P:** I wouldn't have said it was too difficult, you know, if you can democratically insist that dogs and maybe cats should be microchipped, then surely you can democratically insist that pigs be given an actual outdoor life.

**K:** Yes, that's a good point. I think the DEFRA holding numbers are based on kind of biosecurity regulations if I'm not mistaken.

**P:** Well that raises its own problem, doesn't it? Because, a pig living in a house, yes it will use a litter tray, but these pigs, when they spend a penny, they go on for hours. You know, you're trying to move a pig from his sty out into the yard so he can walk around the fields during the day, and they all stop to have a wee and it's like "for God's sake, get on with it!". They do contain an awful lot of urine.

**K:** Yes, and that could be dangerous if you're near a waterway or something.

**P:** Also if you have children, and quite often they're bought as pets for children. Then, that leads on to, if a pig does bite, they don't let go. A pig will chew what is in its mouth until that bit that it's got in its mouth comes away from what it's attached to. I got thrown the other day by one of our pigs. He was annoyed that I went into his sleeping quarters. Now, this is a pig that since he came here as a young pig, has been really kindly treated. But I went into his sty at night, when he didn't want me there because I was showing him to somebody, and he came up behind me and threw me. I flew through the air and landed on another pig, which was lucky, otherwise my head would have hit a concrete wall, and probably knocked me unconscious. So, they can be unpredictable, and you do not put your hand anywhere near a pigs' mouth.

**K:** Do you hear any testimonies from owners who have had these kind of issues, particularly with children?

**P:** No I have to say I haven't. But you know, I mean a horse bite is bad enough but at least a horse lets go, pigs don't.

**K:** Yeah, I've been bitten by a horse I know what that feels like. But I haven't been bitten by a pig yet, hopefully I don't!

**P:** Yeah, you don't want to ever be bitten by a pig.

**K:** Yeah, hope I don't ever have to go through that. Talking about Coronavirus and the general pandemic as well, could you tell me how that has impacted your rescue?

**P:** Erm, it impacted financially in that we couldn't open our little charity shop, neither could we do our therapy work, neither could we welcome visitors in. However, set aside that, we have a girl on the yard, who is brilliant on social media, and she has put out appeals, which have been extremely well responded to. Erm, an Amazon Wishlist, so one day a wheelbarrow might turn up, another day, a pair of goat and sheep hoof clippers might turn up, bags of feed. We're on first name terms with all the delivery drivers. I mean, it's been really heartwarming the response we've had, and donations have been coming in, and erm now of course, we're applying for anything that's going business wise in the way of support. But funding applications are deadly, I have a saying and it is that the road to insanity is paved with funding applications.

**K:** I'd agree with that!

**P:** I mean they are getting more and more difficult.

**K:** Mm, it's jumping through all these hoops, trying to say what they want to hear. Erm, but I was reading in the first lockdown, people's relationships with their pets changed quite a lot, obviously we're at home more, our pets are used to our company more, but there was also a 'puppy boom' people where lots of people bought puppies to quell boredom and thing. Have you seen that with any farm animals?

**P:** Well I have a friend who runs our local canine rescue, and they are being inundated with "oh I'm going back to work I can't really keep this dog anymore" there's a lot of that. We don't do dogs, cats or donkeys because they have their own excellent charities, we're more farm animals who have been kept domestically who need to find their forever home. But yeah, I believe the puppy-boom is having a really awful after-effect.

**K:** Yeah, I would agree. Did you see any similar behaviour with farm animals and people buying farm animals in lockdown?

**P:** Well, they couldn't, because they erm, there were restrictions on movement and things with farm animal. You can break lockdown rules to nip down somewhere to pick up a puppy, but if you're trying to move a pig or a cow or a sheep or a goat, it's a different matter.

**K:** Mm, well I heard a lot of people started buying chickens in the first lockdown, I assume so they could have their own supply of eggs.

**P:** I haven't erm, we're always getting chickens given to us, erm I haven't noticed an increase in the, and of course, right now chickens are locked down. Bird flu, she says looking out of the window where this chicken we've got, I don't know how she does it but she escapes. She's walking round the yard right now like "lockdown? What's lockdown?"

**K:** Doesn't apply to her, clearly! [both laugh]. This moves us nicely on actually, to biosecurity and disease risk issues. Obviously there are several transmissible diseases that pigs can harbour. Do you think the standard owner would be aware of the main ones?

**P:** No, they would be totally unaware. They would also be totally unaware of diet. They all are, because we quiz them.

**K:** So, a lot of people are feeding kitchen waste and things? Is that what you mean?

**P:** They feed them all sorts, it's quite amazing. We've had pigs who've been fed just porridge because they thought that's what the pig would like. Bread, loads and loads and loads of bread which of course isn't good for them, and people know that a puppy needs worming, but they don't think for one minute that pigs need worming.

**K:** Do they not get this information from a vet?

**P:** Well, they could do if they asked! I think people who gayly go into wanting a pet pig because, the whole street is going to be impressed by the fact they've got something different. This happens with reptiles as well, iguanas. You know, buy your iguana a diamond studded walking harness and walk it down the road. A lot of it is showing off. And these sort of people don't go and consult with the vet and ask them. And I wonder if a lot of urban vets actually would have, would look it up and maybe wouldn't immediately have much knowledge because they're not seeing that kind of animal, like our farm vet who is seeing them all the time.

**K:** Yeah, a small animal vet may not have the correct knowledge about pigs which is concerning. But erm, I did see recently that there was a kind of memo sent out, I think by the British veterinary association to small animal vets, saying look out for pet pigs because these are the issues they have. So, I suppose that's sort of encouraging.

**P:** Yes, it is encouraging, I'm delighted to hear that.

**K:** It also does mean that there's probably more pet pigs and this needs to be addressed, so it's a bit of a double-edged sword.

**P:** It does need to be addressed definitely, I mean, I think I told you, I even spoke to Baroness Gale who is the Labour party's first spokesperson on animal welfare in the House of Lords and she was singularly disinterested.

**K:** Really?

**P:** Yeah

**K:** And what kind of points where you bring up?

**P:** Erm, the fact that, erm, what I said was that there's no such thing as a micro-pig and people should be stopped from advertising pigs as micro because they don't exist. Teacup pigs are only teacup when they are born. They outgrow the teacup within days, not even weeks. I said, you know, if I put a false advertisement in the paper I'd be sued for it. So why is this thing allowed? I mean, I went on to further welfare issues and I mean, she more or less walked away from me! I obviously bored her.

**K:** Oh no, well hopefully we can make some change over time. Do you think it is breeders at fault here?

**P:** People are breeding so called micro-pigs for money, I mean they are doing it purely for money. They know how big these pigs are going to grow, and they know from their attempts that have gone wrong the results and problems that can occur.

**K:** And how do they stop people from coming back once their pig has grown bigger than expected? How do they stop people from, I don't know, causing a fuss with them, because it seems to be that owners have their pig that grows too big and they take it to a sanctuary.

**P:** Yeah, and I don't know of a single person who has gone back to a breeder to complain.

**K:** I wonder why that is. I don't know, if it were me, well I wouldn't buy a pet pig, but I'd probably go back to the breeder, but it doesn't seem like people are doing that.

**P:** I think people who are ignorant enough to go out and buy a pig without researching it properly are probably too ignorant to even think about approaching the breeder when they don't want it. It's much easier to drive to a sanctuary and dump it. That's why they also come in without movement orders, because they know nothing about movement orders. Pure and simply illegal. I mean I have my own trading standards on board with me, but you know, the pigs come out of the region there's nothing they can do. Unless they talk to other trading standards people, but by and large, trading standards are not taking the problem really seriously. It's kind of out of their remit really.

**K:** Yeah, it's difficult to say who is responsible here.

**P:** It's a very much 'pass the buck' sort of thing.

**K:** Yeah, I think there needs to be at least an organisation or someone accountable here. Talking about movements as well, I've heard of a lot of people taking their pigs for walks and there's certain regulations pertaining to that?

**P:** No, they're totally unaware of that.

**K:** And is walking them quite a common thing to do?

**P:** Evidently, until it grows too big and the harness is no longer able to contain it.

**K:** Yeah, I suppose it's a good way, as you were saying, to show off your pet to your local community. Do you think people get stigma from perhaps neighbours or members of their community for having a pig?

**P:** Some do, some neighbours get very agitated with what's going on and erm, we do live in an age where people tend to not care and turn their back, it's too difficult to make complaints and fall out with people and make a scene.

**K:** Yeah, that's true.

**P:** I think we're very apathetic about things, these days.

**K:** Yeah, I would say that's a perfect way to describe it. Talking about kind of pets and farmed animals as well, how do you think people's perceptions towards farm animals might change once they get a pet pig? Or can you provide any testimonies about that?

**P:** I think their attitude will change very rapidly when they realise that this darling little piglet actually doesn't want to be cuddled, because one thing they hate is being picked up. They will sit on your knee quite happily, but they hate the initial picking up. It takes away their ability to flight. We had to take our latest addition to the vet, she had to go in the car, she was tiny enough to do that. She had a broken jaw. We think she'd been kicked. So she hated being lifted but she was fine once our yard girl was in the back of the car sitting down and so they're not cuddly, they like their tummies being scratched but they don't like being cuddled. They don't like you to put their arms around them as you would a puppy, or a pony even, they don't like that.

**K:** And some people want them as lap pets.

**P:** Yeah. And they're very independent people, pigs are. Of course, they are extremely near us in DNA and also exceedingly intelligent, they're probably the nearest we've got to a farm animal relative.

**K:** Yeah, I think other than primates they are one of the closest animals to us.

**P:** But then if you go into pig DNA I mean, pigs they grow parts for use in humans. Pig milk is as near as human milk as you can find, and why don't Jews eat pork? I think it's maybe that relationship, the similarity. Because I expect pork flesh is more similar to ours, certainly than beef or anything.

**K:** Maybe, I wouldn't know

**P:** You can research that one Kate!

**K:** Yeah, I'll have a look for that! Talking about meat as well, do you think people have different attitudes towards meat and the meat industry when they spend more time with pigs?

**P:** Erm, I think, I don't think that getting the pet pig changes people's eating habits. Erm, I don't know that because I've never asked "are you vegetarian, vegan or carnivore?". I wouldn't imagine, it might put them off, if they've got a piglet sitting in the corner of the dining room, it might but them off eating pork. But if they're meat eaters, they might still tuck into a steak. I have never asked that question, and yet it is a question that everyone asks me. "Oh you'll be vegetarian". And I say, no, I'm not. Because I have no objection to animals being properly reared and looked after and humanely and quickly killed. It's what we do, you take out a species, you take out a hundred more.

**K:** Yeah. What would you say to someone who's potentially thinking about buying a pet pig from a breeder?

**P:** Absolutely don't do it. Really and truly don't do it. Foster one of ours or come and scratch its tummy here. We erm, actually have pig scratching, pig tummy scratching sessions. Our Alzheimer’s group love scratching pigs tummies. One of our pig sees them coming and rolls over to facilitate, it's quite amusing. Because also they do relate, the pigs relate to these people with dementia.

**K:** Why is that?

**P:** Because they're sensitive to the human state just as horses are, so in our opinion, and we do a lot of therapy work, the pig is the nearest to the horse for its sensitivity towards humans.

**K:** Could you tell me a bit more about your therapy work and how the pigs are involved in it?

**P:** Well, the pigs are involved purely because they do love being scratched. So, we'll take a group, and we always work in small groups, we'll take the group from sitting on chairs grooming Shetland ponies on to the back yard where the pigs tend to hang out and any pig offering a tummy, they will get down and scratch it and the pigs then tend to follow them about. Maybe even rub their heads on them.

**K:** Yeah, do you have any individual pigs who don't enjoy it?

**P:** Well, the one who threw me, we wouldn't actually let any form of group near him, he is known as Grumpy and you know, we would keep him away from people. Also, if we think the pigs are maybe not enjoying attention as much as we think they are, we will move the group on to another pig. Because sometimes they don't want to be bothered, but they let you know by being restless, or even getting up and walking away. Other times they will lie there very contently or wander around with people. We don't allow feeding because that just raises trouble.

**K:** What kind of trouble?

**P:** Well, you get mobbed, if you produce food on any of our premises, the goats will come and eat you alive in order to get to the food! But the pigs are like that as well, erm they, you know, they all love titbits. So we don't allow the public to do that, we might slip the odd thing here and there. Like a treat, but a rare treat.

**K:** Sounds like a sensible decision. Are there maybe any challenges that maybe we haven't discussed so far that pet pig owners might come across?

**P:** No, I think the whole challenge of keeping a pig, keeping it clean, keeping it tidy, keeping it healthy, it is a huge challenge. If information sheets were put out with these pigs, half the people who are buying them probably wouldn't after reading the information sheet. Needless to say, most breeders don't offer information sheets.

**K:** Do you have your own information sheets that you would give out if someone wanted to rehome for example?

**P:** We don't rehome.

**K:** Oh, you don't rehome do you?

**P:** Once they're here, they're here for good.

**K:** Why is that you don't rehome?

**P:** Because I don't trust people. I mean I have a lot of horses out on loan, and I have to go and check them, I can't start checking loads of homes with pigs and I doubt I’d get people with the proper facilities anyway.

**K:** Yes, it's hard to ensure the checks.

**P:** We had a lady who erm, had phoned in huge distress that she had two micro pigs and actually couldn't keep them anymore, and would we please take them. So, we took them, and the next day she phoned back to say she couldn't live without her pigs and they're going to have to pick them up and take them home again. So, we started to ask, "are you sure you've got the right premises, herd mark?". So, they came to pick the pigs up and I don't know what made us do it, but we google earthed their address, they had a pocket handkerchief-sized garden. Very interesting that right on the back of all this happening, animal health from Ayre rang me and asked if I had recently, so I told them the story, and I had a feeling that her pigs were maybe forcibly removed. They were in a little terraced house with this tiny, tiny garden. I would have thought that you know, the neighbours were causing serious problems.

**K:** Yeah, that seems the only way they would be removed, if the neighbours were reporting them.

**P:** I was waiting to be asked to take them back, but we weren't. Even putting those pigs, I mean they came in those fancy carriers that people carry dogs to shows in, erm, suitable for a very small pig but certainly not for a bigger one. But they came all the way from Prestwick in Ayrshire and then came all the way back, and the stress of that would have been awful for them.

**K:** Yeah, I was going to say that would be a very stressful journey. Do you get many people bringing pigs from smallholders as well as from houses and flats?

**P:** No, I haven't had anything from smallholders. They're all house pigs. Some people say, "well I've got a field, and I thought it would be enough, but the pigs dug it up". That's something we didn't speak about, erm the fact that not all pigs, but if they've got a long snout, they will dig. They will turn an acre of ground into a mud bath in weeks. So, you've only got a bit of ground and you do have a digging pig, you will have a mud bath. We had two come to us from Northumberland, lovely lady, adored her pig but they had dug her garden to ruin, and she knew for the pig's sake she had to part with them. That was one of the nice owners.

**K:** Sounds like they're few and far between sometimes.

**P:** Well, she visited from Northumberland, not exactly on the doorstep, think it took them an hour and a half to get here. But she would visit regularly every three months, to see them because she adored them and parting with them actually put her into a mini depression.

**K:** Yeah, must be very difficult to part with them like that. Do you know how many, in terms of numbers, pigs you've taken in over the years?

**P:** I had a rough look and the total I come up with was about 65.

**K:** 65, in what length of time was that?

**P:** That was, well, over the last thirty years. So not over that time, a huge number, but some and I haven't counted some came in pregnant. So, I mean, apart from the initial ones we have had other ones that were pregnant when they came in.

**K:** And is it a fairly steady arrival of pigs or do you notice increases?

**P:** It's sporadic.

**K:** Do you notice any times of year where pigs come in more often?

**P:** No I have to say I've never looked at the year itself

**K:** I only ask because one rescue said they often get some after Christmas.

**P:** Oh no that definitely hasn't happened. Definitely there's been no, I mean a dog is for life and it's not just for Christmas. I'd say there's not many that arrive in the winter, and I'm really giving that some hard thought. The spring when they start birthing would be the most likely.

**K:** Yeah, before we wrap up is there anything else you'd like to add? Anything we haven't touched upon which you feel is important?

**P:** No, if your study could bring the awareness for the need to the authorities to not just hand out holding numbers to people it would be highly advantageous to pet pigs.

**K:** Yeah, and I do hope to speak to DEFRA and hopefully see where it can go.

**P:** Well I wish you all the very best of luck with your PhD, and yeah, thank you for choosing pigs. They need a voice.