Interview with Mary (pseudonym) pig sanctuary volunteer

27th November 2021, walking interview at the sanctuary.

Researcher: [K]

K: How did you get involved?

P: Well, I knew [Jacqui], I met her through my other half. I didn’t know anything about pigs or have a particular affinity toward them. I was just inspired by [Jacqui] and wanted to work with her, it wasn’t about the pigs at all. But now, they’re like my family. It’s therapeutic being here with the animals, with nature, just being outside, you know? I had a pretty stressful job before, I worked in the prison service for years. Coming here, I could just leave that all behind and just forget everything.

K: And how has your relationship with the pigs changed since?

P: I think they’re just like big dogs. Their tails wag, they respond to their name. They’re just so inquisitive, friendly and yeah, I just love them.

K: Do you have a favourite pig here?

P: No! [nodding head jokingly]…. Yes, [Dotty], but don’t tell the others! She knows my voice, I come to see her first when I’m here and she runs out to see me. I’m the only one who she allows to give her a belly scratch, she doesn’t do that for anyone else. But there’s some pigs here who don’t like me either, I’m not sure why.

[we walk over to [Dotty]’s pen and she quickly comes running up to the fence where we stand]

P: She’s just lovely, isn’t she?

K: Yeah, she’s a sweetie!

P: Her eyes, too. She’s got human eyes, she’s beautiful.

[She continues to scratch [Dotty]’s head and talk to her in a happy tone, akin to speaking to a small child]

K: It’s funny isn’t it, some of them aren’t nearly as happy to see us!

P: Yeah, some of them just aren’t that fussed. I think the couple that don’t like me that much, maybe I’m just not their cup of tea, but in general, they’re all really friendly and so gentle too.

[we move to another pen]

P: These two are lovely.

[She encourages them out of the hut by calling their names and shaking the bucket]

P: You can see they struggle a bit with their feet and [Bernadette] has curvature of the spine. I think that’s because their old owner didn’t really look after them properly, not enough nutrients in their diet or something. It’s been lovely seeing them in this pen though. Their old pen, just over there [pointing], got really muddy and they couldn’t really get around. They weren’t spending much time outside at all. So, it was [Jacqui]s’ idea to put a concrete slab in here, helps them move around more because it’s not as soft. It’s really done wonders for them, they come out much more. It’s so nice, on a sunny day they’ll be lying out here all day and it’s just lovely to see them so happy.

K: That must be lovely when they’re all out

P: Yeah, they just seem happy.

K: Do you have pets at home?

P: Yeah, I have dogs.

K: How do your bonds with the pigs here compare with your dogs at home?

P: They’re the same really. I love them as I do my dogs. They’re just like dogs too, waggy tails, very intelligent. They’re so clever, which is something I didn’t really know about pigs before I came here either. They mean a lot to me, as I said, it’s just nice to know that I’m helping them too, we form trusting bonds with the pigs which they’ve never really had before, well some of them. It’s rewarding for me, too.

K: So therapeutic for both the pigs and you.

P: Oh definitely, they’re just amazing animals. Being here, it’s like a very supporting community too, the people as well as the animals. I just love it, even when it’s cold! Like, when I have to miss a day, or I’ve got an appointment or something, I usually try and come another day in that week, I can’t miss my day here!

K: How do you talk about the pigs to your friends and family who aren’t really interested in animals as much?

P: Well, I make all my friends visit! They all have to sponsor a pig too. A fiver a month, come on, I mean we spend that on a bottle of wine every week! No excuses. I think they get it when they come here, they realise what gentle, lovely animals they are.

K: What do you mean by ‘they get it’?

P: I suppose just what we do here, what we do for the pigs and why it’s important. They’re all individuals here and they can come see their personalities, get to know them.

K: Did you have a similar realisation when you first started coming here?

P: Yeah. First day, I said I’m not eating pork ever again. And I haven’t. How could you?

K: Are you vegetarian?

P: Well, I don’t eat meat. I don’t call myself a vegetarian though.

K: Sure, so meeting the pigs here was enough to quit pork?

P: Without a doubt, I wouldn’t eat my dog so why would I eat a pig, you know? They’re so intelligent, they love a head scratch. I could never eat them.

K: Have you been here when one of the pigs has passed away?

P: Yes, there’s been a couple whilst I’ve been here, I think. A few weeks ago, we lost Jeff. So that was most recent, he was poorly.

K: How did you cope with that?

P: Well, you go and have a cry. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that, going to have a cry. But then, you come back and you’ve got to get on with things and care for the rest of the pigs, even new ones that need our help. So, we all just move forward really. But it is sad, really sad and it is hard for all of us.

K: Yes.

P: With [Jerry], it was quite sudden too. We moved him into a new pen maybe a couple of weeks before and he was getting on really well in there, he seemed pretty happy. He got poorly quite quickly, you see, so there wasn’t really a lot of time to prepare for it. So that was difficult, but we never forget them.

K: Yes, I’ve seen the board with all their photos

[near the entrance to the sanctuary, there is a board with faces of all the animals who have died at the sanctuary, including pigs, cats, guinea pigs and dogs. At the top, there is a picture of ‘the rainbow bridge’. It reads “Never forget, that in between Hello & Goodbye, there was love. So much love.”]

P: Yes they all go up on the board, so we never forget.

K: That’s nice

P: Yeah, it’s important they are remembered. They’re all individuals in their own way and we remember them like we do with family.

K: What is it like to care for a pig that’s perhaps not very well and may pass away?

P: Often, it happens quite suddenly, like with [Jerry]. So, sometimes we don’t really know. But other times, we’ve had poorly pigs. Erm, [Lilly] is an example. She was quite poorly. We monitored her for a while, encouraged her to eat, she was often hand fed at times. But when we know they’re going to pass, it is just about making them as comfortable as possible if there’s nothing we can do to stop it. So we’ll give them lots of extra straw and just, yeah wait I suppose. It’s very difficult, but we know we’ve given them a happy life here and that’s what matters for them really.