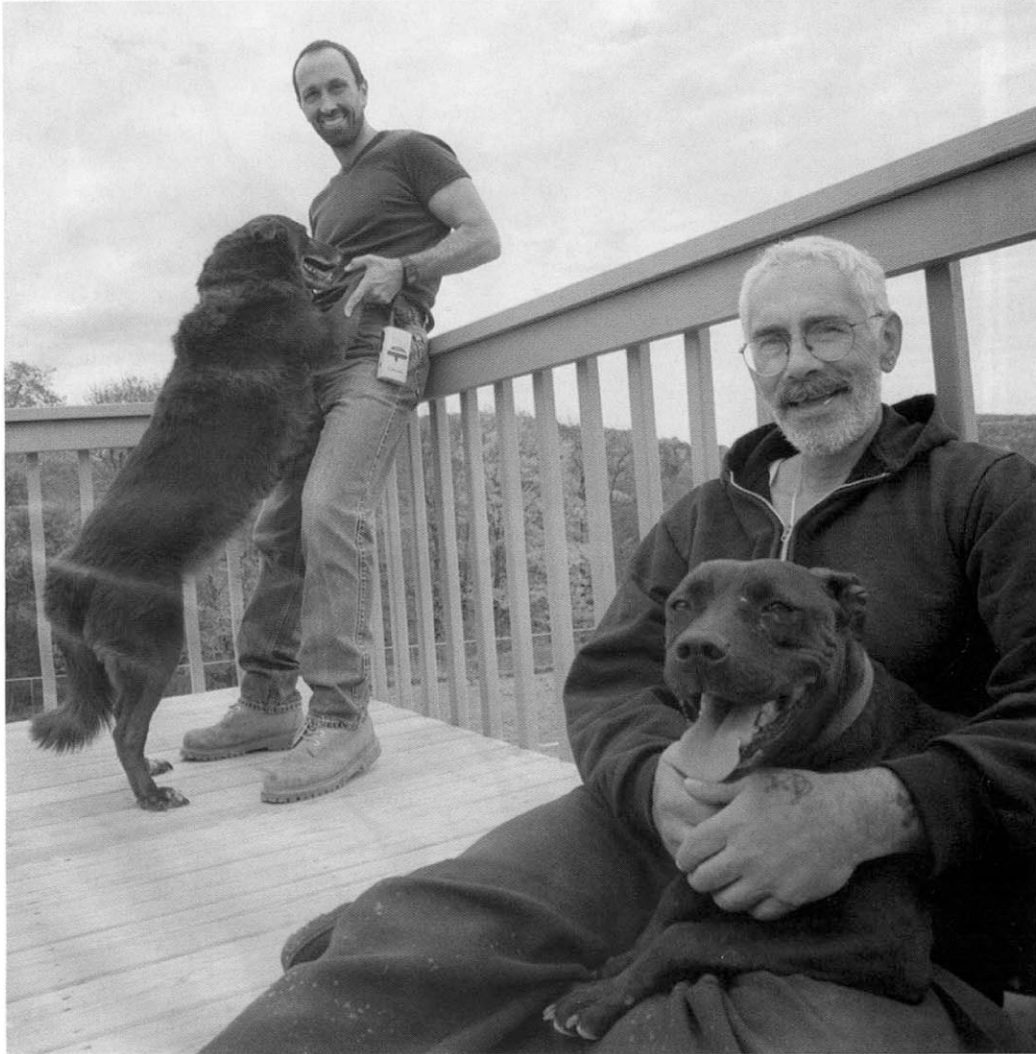


# A Tale of Two Eddies

How two tough guys saved the animals – and themselves



Eddie Lama and Eddie Rizzo at The Oasis sanctuary in North Branch, New York.

► Adapted from stories by Steve Israel and Elizabeth Sembower in the Times Herald Record

He calls it the “Miracle on 59th Street.” It was a magical moment – the kind of unexpected triumph that makes you realize one person really *can* make a difference.

Standing outside New York’s ritzy St. Moritz Hotel, Eddie Lama was distributing anti-fur literature. A woman, draped in sable and

towing a small child, glanced at him with a patina of hostility as she started to sweep past. Lama stepped up and gently asked her to take his pamphlet. He remarked that if she was going to wear fur, she should really read about where it came from. The woman snatched the Friends of Animals leaflet from his outstretched hand and rushed away.

Lama didn’t really believe that she would read it. Probably, he thought, it would be dropped on the street a block away, becoming just one more piece of litter. But a little later, the woman returned, on the verge of tears. “I’m so sorry. I just didn’t know. I’m so sorry,” she murmured repetitively, perhaps seeking forgiveness for her obliviousness from the animals’ representative. Not only did the woman vow to stop wearing fur, she signed up to be a member of Friends of Animals that day.

Change usually comes hard. Eddie Lama knows a lot about change. In the animal welfare field there are probably not many

people who have altered their lives to the degree that Lama and his buddy Eddie Rizzo have.

The two Eddies, as they’re sometimes dubbed, met in prison, both heroin junkies who were serving time for armed robbery. Before his arrest, Lama had suffered from a drug deal gone bad, ending up lying in the street, beaten to a pulp with the help of a baseball bat. He said later that he would never forget the silence

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that met his cries of pain and would do everything he could to make sure that no animal suffered that way with nobody there to care.

Animals didn’t play much of a part in either man’s life. That is until Lama, out of prison and running a construction business, ended up catsitting for a tabby. At the time, he recalls, he was hoping it might lead to a date. But when he accidentally stepped on the cat’s tail and heard her howl, he was stunned. He began watching her leaping playfully, tossing a ball, yawning and stretching, and just being a loving, happy animal with a “whole array of emotions I never knew existed,” he says. Suddenly, life seemed to make a little more sense – become just a little more joyful. When he revealed his discovery to Rizzo, whom he’d helped get clean from drugs after time spent in prison, Rizzo thought Lama had gone a little loopy. But soon the two men were not only fast friends but also fast animal allies.

It’s not just that their shared epiphany led to a common appreciation and respect for animals. Their revelation has gone way beyond a simple transformation into being affirmed “animal people.” The duo has become *serious* movers and shakers in the animal welfare world.

With the construction business a success, Lama and Rizzo began working together to share their story through public education. They tour schools, where teachers and pupils warmly welcome them, awed and inspired. And they’re not just sharing a message – they’re living it.

Together, they reconstructed a rundown old dairy, the Oasis, into a state-of-the-art animal sanctuary in the mountains of North Branch, New York, for dogs, cats, and any other creatures in need of a home, including ducks, turkeys, sheep, pigs, rabbits, and chickens.

The property is outfitted with observation decks for potential adopters, extensive outdoor areas, doggie washing stations, and other goodies for the animals. Lama, who spends thousands of dollars every year feeding and caring for animals, dreams that they’ll soon be able to add a medical clinic, staff offices, and an adoption center. Rizzo heads up the live-in staff that includes several former drug addicts. It’s a metamorphosis that TV evangelists dream of. And the pair is gaining national recognition with an award-winning documentary, *The Witness*, chronicling Lama’s life.

But it isn’t about praise, or Horatio Alger stories for either man. It’s all about the animals.

“I was always the animal person, a dog trainer and such,” says Rizzo. “When I first knew him, Eddie Lama was the last person to care about animals. He’s done a complete turn-around.”

Lama admits the truth of that and describes his newfound insight. “Somewhere along the way,” says Lama, “I saw that we are all on the same road, no matter how many legs we have.”

The two Eddies hope to make that journey just a little easier for all the creatures lucky enough to cross their particular path. 🐾

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