

# Buster's story still resonates, 10 years later

## Anti-cruelty law should be stronger, advocates say

**BY STEVEN COOK**  
*Gazette Reporter*

Every semester, Nancy Bonesteel finds herself at Hudson Valley Community College speaking at a class on animal law, sharing the story of her family's cat, Buster.

It was Buster's torture and death at the hands of a neighbor that turned Bonesteel into an activist for animal rights, and Buster into the symbol for the law that bears his name. "Buster's Law," passed 10 years ago last month, makes aggravated animal cruelty a felony offense.

"When I first get in front of the class, the younger ones are slouched down in their seats, 'great, another animal activist,'" Bonesteel said last week. "But usually within three or four minutes, they're sitting straight up and listening, asking lots of questions."

Buster's story captured the attention of a city, a state and people as far away as California after his 1997 killing at the hands of a 16-year-old neighbor near the Bonesteel's Poplar Street home.

The neighbor, Chester Williamson, doused Buster with kerosene and set him afire with a cigarette lighter Nov. 12, 1997. Another neighbor found Buster, an 18-month-old tabby, un-

der a car and rushed him to the vet. He was so badly burned, he was identified by his large nose and number of toes. Buster lingered for three weeks, but finally succumbed.

With Buster's story as a rallying cry, more than 100,000 people signed petitions in support of harsher sentences for animal cruelty. State legislators passed Buster's Law and, by November 1999, it was a felony in New York state to do serious physical injury to a companion animal.

### MANY CONVICTIONS

Since then, more than 346 convictions statewide have resulted from cases under Buster's Law. Ten people have been sent to prison and 118 sentenced to jail or jail and probation under the law, according to state Department of Criminal Justice Services numbers.

In the Capital Region, 52 cases have been brought, with three people sent to prison and 12 sentenced to jail or jail and probation.

Animal advocates say the law has been a great start but it should be strengthened, including increasing the criteria for acts enforceable under the law and requiring psy-

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BARRY SLOAN/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER

Nancy Bonesteel holds her cat Boo at her home in Schenectady on Friday

# Buster: Animal cruelty law now 10 years old; revisions in works

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chological evaluations for those convicted of abusing animals.

Mathew B. Tully, head of the

Schenectady County SPCA's law enforcement arm, said better definitions of terms in the statute, such as "sadistic," are needed. Also, the law covers "companion animals,"

making a distinction with farm or other animals. But a pet such as a pig may not be automatically covered.

"I think Buster's Law was a good

first step," Tully, of Niskayuna, said. "It was a great addition, but there needs to be fine tuning to ensure it's properly used in all appropriate cases."

The SPCA has had a law enforcement arm in Schenectady County for about 18 months, working to augment local police department's efforts against animal cruelty, Tully said. They have nine sworn officers, all volunteer and all working about eight hours each month, with the power to file charges.

The officers have yet to file a felony animal cruelty case in their short history. But Schenectady Police recently filed such a case against a city man, accused of kicking and seriously injuring a cat on Lenox Road in October. The charge was filed earlier this month.

## HORROR STORIES

Schenectady County District Attorney Robert Carney said last week he couldn't comment on the recent case, but said Buster's Law has been a valuable tool.

"There are a class of cases, which the facts are so bad that it demands a felony treatment," Carney said. "Before Buster's Law, we couldn't do it. There isn't much redeeming about somebody torturing a helpless animal."

A main argument for the animal cruelty laws, aside from the injuries to the pets themselves, has been that violence against animals can be a precursor to violence against humans.

## 'Cruelty to animals can lead to violence against humans.'

**VALERIE LANG**

Professor, Hudson Valley Community College

Activists need look no further than Buster's tormentor, Williamson, to support their argument. In 2003 and 2005, Williamson was sent to prison on stolen property and burglary convictions, sentenced to up to three years in both cases.

Then, on Sept. 28, 2007, just a few blocks from where he attacked Buster, Williamson, then 26, lured a 15-year-old into Vale Cemetery under the pretext of looking for her sister and attempted to rape her. Officers searching the cemetery came upon Williamson and the girl, breaking up the attack.

Williamson is now serving 12 years in state prison.

"It brought a consciousness to people that this type of cruelty exists, that it needs to be addressed," said Valerie Lang, the professor in the Hudson Valley animal law class. "It's a pervasive problem. Cruelty to animals," she said, "can lead to violence against humans."

Lang echoed other calls for improving Buster's Law. The current law requires serious physical injury, but doesn't address the intent of the perpetrator.

Lang recalled an Albany County case where a man videotaped himself trying to hang a kitten. The

kitten survived and wasn't seriously hurt, leading the case to be prosecuted as a misdemeanor.

"That is still depraved behavior," Lang said. "The law needs to be rectified so that actions such as that are considered felony cruelty."

Lang also suggested the law needs to be expanded to protect all animals from cruelty. She noted another recent Albany County case where a turtle was blown up, a case that didn't fall under Buster's Law.

Hunters and livestock owners shouldn't be concerned by such an expansion, Lang said, because the difference is the depravity of the act.

"Blowing up an animal is depraved, plain and simple," she said.

## TEDISCO ROLE

Shepherding Buster's Law through the Assembly and authoring it in 1999 was Assemblyman James Tedisco, R-Schenectady. Tedisco said last week he is working on some of the gaps in the current law.

He noted, among other cases, the ongoing case involving Daisy, a 4-year-old beagle, who was missing from her Saratoga County home for two weeks.

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She was found Nov. 8 in a wooded, swampy area in a plastic bag, bound with duct tape. She survived the ordeal and is back home with her family.

The investigation into that attack is ongoing and various organizations have teamed up to offer a reward of \$7,000 for the arrest and conviction of the person responsible.

"The fortunate thing is these animals made it through without serious injury or death, but obviously the perpetrators were trying to seriously injure the animals," Tedisco said.

There has also been work to include horses as companion animals after a show horse in Rensselaer County was repeatedly stabbed and killed last year.

Tedisco is also working to mandate psychological evaluations for those convicted of torturing animals.

He said any enhancements to Buster's Law must not harm sportsmen or the agricultural industry.

"We've come a long way, but have a long way to go to understand that this does impact us all," Tedisco said. "The astonishing thing is that this came about because of a little animal, a cat named Buster."

Bonesteel said from the start, she wanted psychological evaluations to be part of the law. Buster's death wasn't a spur-of-the-moment event, she noted. There were a series of steps taken, including capturing and restraining the animal before the act was finally carried out.

"This is the kind of mind you're dealing with in people who abuse animals," she said.

After Buster's death, Bonesteel and her family received two new cats, Bub and Babe. But in the intervening years, moves to a series of apartments prevented her from owning a feline companion and the two cats were adopted out to another good home.

Only recently has she been able to get a cat again, adopting a 3½-year-old gray tiger cat and naming her Boo for the date of adoption, Halloween.

As she spoke, she noted Boo was rubbing against her leg. "She's just lovely," Bonesteel said. "She loves us and we love her."