



California
pets

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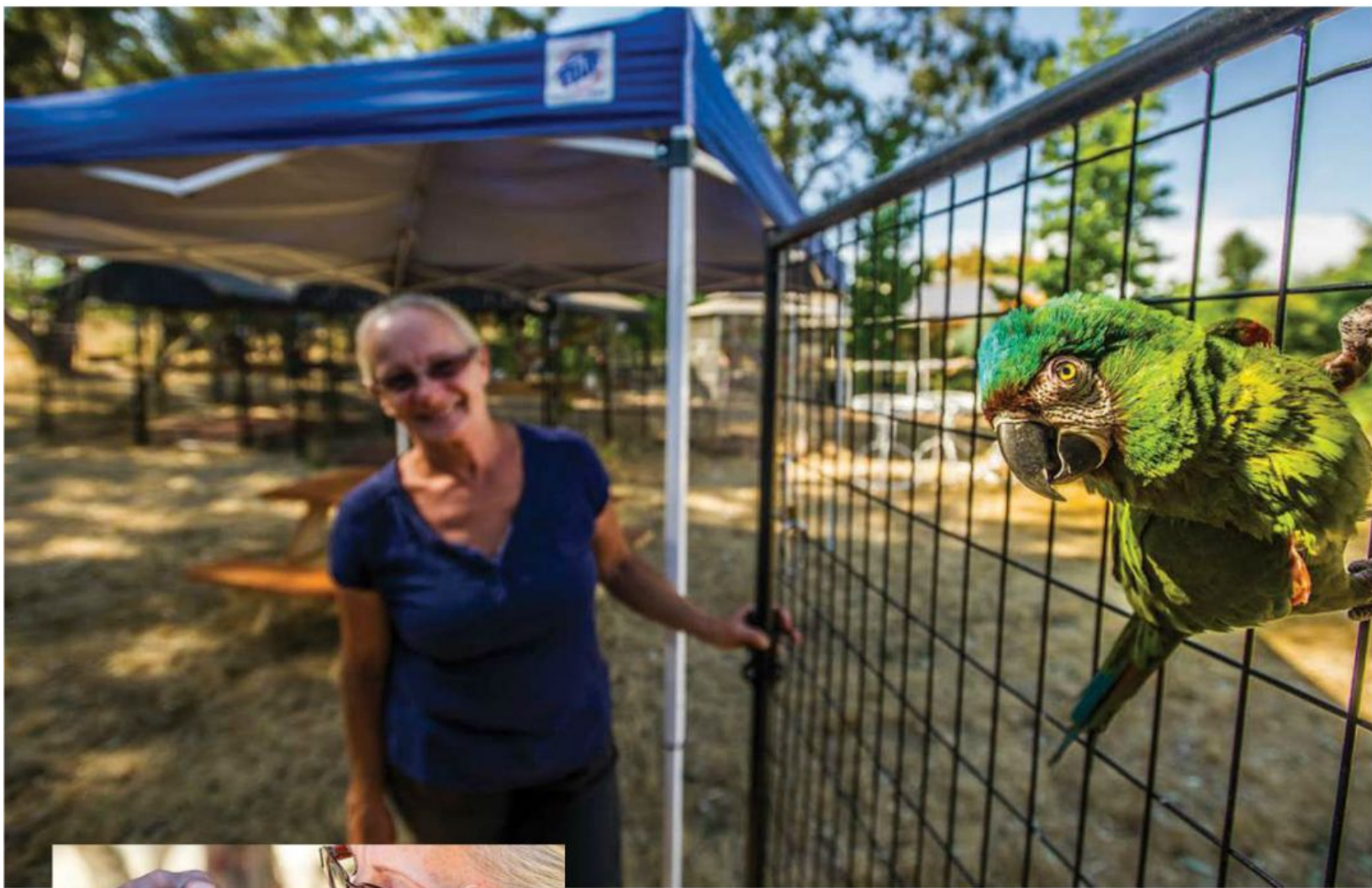
Sacramento's Best Friends

A second chance

Wilton-based rescue group is about more than saving birds

13 ways to go green with your pet

As the weather heats up, beware of algal blooms -- which can be toxic to dogs



A SECOND CHANCE

Donna Costley's Wilton-based rescue group is about more than saving birds

By David Allen Brown

Donna Costley saves parrots. And in a very real way, the 35 parrots she cares for on her five-acre sanctuary in Wilton save her. Costley operates Second Chance Bird Rescue out of her home and of the 35 birds she has inside and outside of her sprawling ranch home, 12 of them cannot be adopted. But each one of the Amazons, cockatoos, conures and macaws she cares for also care for her as she continues to process her grief.

In 2012, her son Christopher Schmidt, wife Diana, and their three young children were killed in a fiery vehicle crash in Nebraska while moving back to California from Washington, D.C. The grief for the mother of six was unbearable. She retired early from a Veterans' Administration job in Fairfield in 2014 and then moved to Wilton with her husband, Gary, on a parcel large enough to accommodate the birds, and a remembrance garden for her family members she lost in the crash.

"(The birds) are therapy for me," Costley said on a blazing June afternoon as she showed a couple of visitors her menagerie that also includes dogs, cats, chickens, goats, a turtle and peacocks. "My doctor told me it was either work or my health. I chose to retire."

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Her full-time job now is caring for the animals and fielding prospective adoptive owners for the parrots. Because many of the parrots she has were abused, Costley is careful in selecting whom to allow to adopt. She performs a home inspection to make sure the birds will be healthy and safe in their new environment and coaches the new parrot parents on what can be toxic to parrots, such as the use of Teflon-coated cookware, incense and candles.

At her Wilton sanctuary, the more delicate birds are kept in large and well-appointed cages in a three-car garage. The larger parrots are kept in one of 12 10-foot-by-10-foot outdoor aviaries that were originally meant to be dog kennels. The aviaries have roofs and floors made of stepping stones to protect the birds from diseases found in the soil, as well as making daily cleaning a lot easier, Costley said.

Each morning, Costley rises and begins the hours-long process of cutting fruits and vegetables and combining the meals with specially formulated feed pellets and nuts for each of the parrots. Before feeding time she cleans and maintains each cage, then makes sure the parrots have fresh water and finally delivers the munchies.

"I go through \$600 a month in feed bills," said Costley, whose Second Chance Bird Rescue operates as a non-profit. "I spent \$200 just this week in walnuts."

But the birds seem to appreciate the effort and expense. They all perk up as Costley makes her way through the lines of cages. She talks to each one and calls to them by name. Some have featherless bodies from neurotically tearing out their plumage. Others flinch or hiss at visitors, still traumatized from past owners who, for example, taped them up with duct tape and used them as footballs. That's just one of the terrible stories Costley relates to visitors. But the most



common reason for surrenders is owners passing away and the family members either not able to or willing to care for birds that can live into their 60s.

The oldest bird Costley has is a 42-year-old Moluccan cockatoo named Hoagie. There's also a pair of blue-front conures named Amigo and Joey who Costley estimates are at least 30. She affectionately calls them her "grumpy old men."

Before Costley rescued parrots she started fostering some birds with the intent to just keep a few. But she fell in love with her first foster bird, Princess, a peach-colored Moluccan cockatoo, and decided to keep her. It was a "foster failure," Costley joked. Princess will enjoy the rest of her life in a huge cage with plenty of food, toys and love.

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