

THE NATURE CONNECTION

Crow becomes a teacher

By Martha Rounds

concord@wickedlocal.com

Three years ago, The Nature Connection got a rare opportunity. A call came from the Vermont Institute of Natural Sciences in Quechee, Vt.: they had a crow that needed a home. The crow, found as a nestling, was healthy and able to fly, but it had a congenital neurological condition that made it unable to find food for itself. It could never survive in the wild. Could The Nature Connection work with the bird?

The Nature Connection, a Concord nonprofit, brings animal and nature programs to at-risk youth, people with disabilities, and elders, connecting individ-

uals with nature's capacity to heal and to teach. After considering the needs of a wild crow, the staff enthusiastically agreed, and "Crow" joined The Nature Connection.

"Many people walk around with invisible disabilities, illness and pain," said Jude Aronstein, a member of The Nature Connection's board of advisers. "When we bring Crow to a group of at-risk youth, Crow, who can fly but who has an invisible disability that prevents her from caring for herself, gives us a way to talk about parts of our lives — whatever they are — that limit us, too. The bird's history serves as a metaphor for the trials of life that we as humans face."

Crow lives in a large outdoor enclosure graced with branches for perching and a swing, toys, mirrors, and other objects to occupy her. And twice each day for an hour or more, Nature Connection volunteers visit Crow to help socialize her for her visits to children or elders in Nature Connection programs.

"I've been working with her since Day 1," said Joanie Caruso, of Groton. "It's a

privilege to have her welcome me into her world."

Caruso's experiences with Crow have inspired her to become a wildlife rehabilitator; she recently began to work with a young screech owl that cannot walk. Someday, this owl will take part in Nature Connection programs.

Molly Peckar, a ninth-grader from West Boylston, cares for Crow every Saturday morning, no matter what the weather. Like other volunteers, Molly painstakingly cleans Crow's cage and feeds her, but her most important task is to be a companion to a bird that is, by instinct and inclination, smart and highly social.

"I was ecstatic when I came here three months ago and got to meet her," Molly said. "She's mischievous. She loves to explore. She's intelligent, and she knows when you're talking about her."

Rachel Peckar, Molly's mother, helps her daughter care for Crow. "Molly sits and observes; she tries to learn more about the crow's different caws and behavior," she writes in an email. "We marvel at the beauty of



Crow with Nature Connection volunteer Dee Clarke of Concord. PHOTO BY ALISON GOULD

her eyes when she looks up at us or the tiny feathers on top of her beak — things that we can't notice on the crows out in the wild."

Volunteer Inez Andrews sees her weekly stint with Crow as the realization of a long-held dream. "It's gotten so that I hate to leave her when I go," she said.

Like Andrews, volunteer Ken Nygren cherishes the opportunity to work with Crow. At home, he keeps six bird feeders, and has seen 40 different species of birds in his yard. Here, he works shoulder by wing with a wild bird. "It's been a unique experience. I go at least once a week, and more if they need subs," he said.

"The story of Crow — how she came to us, how she gets cared for, and the part

she plays in programs — is a perfect example of the best work of The Nature Connection," said Aronstein. "She is here because of the extraordinary dedication of our volunteers. She is also here to help children and elders who experience our programs to feel care and admiration for a wild animal and to help them access hidden aspects of their lives."

The Nature Connection is offering a rare chance to see live owls up close. Be sure to check out "Eyes on Owls" on Sunday, March 11, at the Alcott School at 1 and 3 p.m. For information about this event or volunteer opportunities at Nature Connection, visit www.nature-connection.org or call 978-369-2585.