



TRANSPORTING PETS around the clock

Nikki Jardin • Spot Magazine

"It is really important to me to help those who have no way to get their animal to **EMERGENCY VET SERVICES** in the middle of the night."

Great ideas are often born from both necessity and ingenuity. When an idea is also fueled by passion, the resulting work can look a lot like Yeller Cab Pet Taxi, a four-month-old company whose mission is to "create a medium to enhance the well-being of pets and pet owners by connecting them to the care and services they need," says co-founder and public relations director, Nancy Wolske.

Wolske invited Spot to a ride-along — in the company's eye-catching, yellow Nissan Cube with pawprint stenciling — to see Yeller Cab in action and hear her story.

A native Oregonian who "grew up in the cherry orchards of Keizer, Oregon," Wolske's career has included everything from picking farm produce, doing process photography for the state, and designing national PR campaigns. She also spent 20 years in elder care services, and it was during this time the idea for Yeller Cab began taking shape. The love, and ultimate loss, of a beloved dog named Schooner helped transform her vision into reality.

Getting into the comfy passenger seat of the cab, Wolske's guest is greeted by her two miniature Irish

Setters, Cara and Sophie, who are along for a morning ride. The first fare of the day is due for pick-up in the afternoon. Cara pushes her furry red face under the gated divide between the front and roomy pet area in the back for a closer sniff and look-see.

The vehicle is spotless and surprisingly devoid of dog smells or hair. Wolske says in back they use outdoor carpeting that's easily washed and then treated with an ammonia-free enzyme that cuts odor. The van also features roll-down windows in the back, cracked just enough for the dogs to get a little fresh air along the way.

During late-night transports of ailing pets en route to the vet, Wolske provides soft, calm-inducing music. "It's 'Through A Dog's Ear,' she says, turning it up just loud enough to hear lest we be lulled into a dream state. "There's a caution label on it," she says smiling. "'Don't operate heavy machinery while listening to this music.' The dogs love it."

We head east on I-84 to Thousand Acres park in Troutdale where everyone can stretch their legs on this beautiful, crisp fall morning. Once there, Cara and Sophie are unleashed and take off like cannonballs into the tall grasses. While the dogs enjoy

their run, Wolske shares how she dreamed up Yeller Cab.

"When I worked in [adult] long-term care, I regularly saw that dogs and cats were not getting adequate care." Wolske mentions that while many facilities do a fine job of getting immunization and medical records for an incoming resident's pet, plans for the care and welfare of that pet throughout the duration of a resident's stay are rarely, if ever, addressed.

Wolske cites one case in which she had several discussions with one resident's caregiver. "She was a really good assistant, but I kept telling her that the resident could not take care of her cat like she used to. I would say, 'Look, the cat needs fresh water and a litter box change,' and the girl finally came to me and said, 'I'm here to take care of the resident, not her cat,' and that was just a complete and utter disconnect for me."

Wolske mentioned another incident in which a resident's dog frequently urinated on the carpet because he wasn't getting out enough. "I just kept thinking, how can we fix this? And there was nothing available. It was just a consistent problem."

At about this time Wolske adopted Schooner, a retired guide dog. "When I met Schooner I learned a lot about adequate care for animals. When you adopt a career-change dog there is a very specific protocol. Later, when we applied for Schooner to become an animal assistant therapy dog, I saw there were even more things I didn't know. And if I didn't know these things, how are seniors or care facilities supposed to know them?"

In 2008, Wolske took a sabbatical to deal with health issues of her own. That winter, the day after

Christmas, Schooner wasn't able to stand. "I assumed he'd just had too much of something because he bounced right back. But he didn't get up the next morning."

The Christmas of 2008 is remembered by many Portlanders for the terrific snowstorm that locked down the city during that holiday week. Fortunately, Wolske had a 4-wheel drive and was able to get Schooner to Banfield Pet Hospital in Clackamas. "They couldn't find a heartbeat," she says. "We rushed him to DoveLewis, where they found he had metastasized lung cancer. It had ruptured and we lost him."

Wolske is quiet for a moment. "It was very traumatic and it really cemented my belief that this type of service was really needed . . . because I should not have been driving. I was a complete and utter basket case. Fast-forward to picking up his ashes and . . . I couldn't drive. I sat in that parking lot for a half-hour bawling because it was so traumatic for me. It is really important to me to help those who have no way to get their animal to emergency vet services in the middle of the night."

Early this year Wolske happened to meet up with former colleague, Scott Belt, with whom she had shared her idea for a pet taxi years before. When she brought it up again, Belt surprised her by offering to help finance the project, along with an additional business partner, Will Waits. Today, Belt is president and CEO of Yeller Cab, and Waits is director of logistics. Belt's wife, Patricia, came on board as office manager.

The company launched in August 2011, with Wolske and Waits sharing driving duties while Wolske's

husband, Sulman, helps with technological applications such as building the website and designing custom mobile software to help the team navigate to and from their destinations.

While the hope is that the company will grow large enough to employ more people, Wolske says this hands-on approach has been essential in streamlining protocols and seeing where they can improve services for the animals and their humans. "We're not going to put anything in place that we haven't done or aren't willing to do ourselves," she says. ▶▶



Nancy Wolske with Schooner one week before he passed
Photo © Sulman Lodhie

Wolske pulls out a smartphone to text Parker's mom that he's **HOME, SAFE AND SOUND.**

Trust is an important concern, and Wolske understands how precious her cargo is to the families who use her business.

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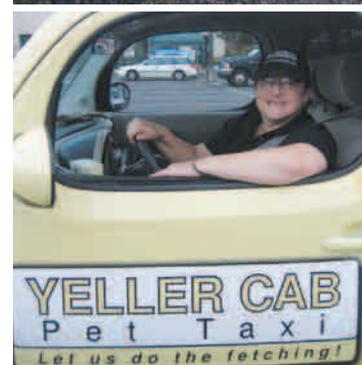
While Cara and Sophie have shown no signs of slowing down, it's time to pack them up so Wolske can get Bella, her first appointment of the day. Bella lives in Milwaukie, and is scheduled to be taken to the dog park for an hour of exercise and socialization.

Arriving at the home, Wolske dons a black ball cap that matches her shirt emblazoned with the Yeller Cab logo. Soon, Bella is comfortably seated in back for the 10-minute ride to North Clackamas dog park.

At the park, we walk Bella for several minutes before taking her into the gated dog run area where she is greeted by a half-dozen snouts welcoming her into the pack. Sitting on a bench with a full view of the activity, Wolske talks about Schooner.

"I really fell in love with Schooner," she says. "Living in the country, people dumped animals. So, we had like 22 cats at a time and all these dogs, but I never had one of my own. So when I got Schooner . . . it was like discovering the 4th dimension . . . like feeling, 'oh, that's what I've been missing!'" She waves a dismissive hand, "I mean, forget the dating scene; I just needed a dog!" she says, laughing.

Wolske met Schooner in 2005 while she was working with a senior whose wife was passing. "His daughter asked me if I knew where she could adopt



a dog. I knew about the career-change program [through Guide Dogs for the Blind], so I arranged for a meeting with the family and Guide Dogs, but this man's Alzheimers was too far gone and he was not present enough to



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have a dog. So I said: how about we share the dog — he can stay here with him during the day and I'll take him home at night. The rep said no, that's not good for the dog, but they said, 'well, how about you? Are you interested in a dog?' And I went . . . 'yeah!'"

"I went out and met Schooner and he was just the saddest looking dog. He'd been retired for allergies so he was going through separation anxiety from the person he'd been assigned to.

So I applied, and got him! About two weeks later he was in my house and I was just so excited. I took him everywhere. We went through the animal assistance therapy program and he was fabulous; very revered, very loved. There was one gentleman who had lost some speech to early-onset dementia, but he would say, 'Thank You, Schooner,' and he would try to play his guitar for Schooner. It was really very moving, really powerful."

We watch the dogs tearing around the field playing "Catch the Boxer with the Ball." Wolske says that while her new line of work is rewarding, it can still be emotionally challenging because her loss of Schooner is still relatively recent. His spirit is very much present in Yeller Cab, with a picture of him gracing the back of each of the company's two vehicles. Cab #1 is named 'Schooner' in his honor.

"He's still with me," says Wolske. "But when I know a dog is go-

ing to pass and I know that I'm transporting him, I talk openly. Of course I ask the pet owner for permission to talk about the angels, to ask Schooner to guide them. I tell them that the angels are coming and Schooner's gonna be there, and I talk about all the animals that are going to help them transition. And maybe people think I'm crazy but . . . I'm fascinated with people who have had near-death experiences and what they've witnessed, so I've asked Schooner to guide them."

The work is meaningful for Wolske whether her fare is being transported for preventative care or for his or her final appointment. "I know that it's so traumatic, and I like to be a support. I don't know why that really resonates with me, but I want to make it a gentle experience as much as I can."

Once Bella is safely returned home, we drive to inner SE Portland to pick up Parker from doggie day care and deliver him to his NE Portland home. Parker was Yeller Cab's first client and is clearly at ease in the back of the cab. The big yellow Lab lies down and relaxes after a stimulating day at the playground, and soon is being led up his own driveway and securely locked into his fenced yard.

Climbing back into her cab, Wolske pulls out a smartphone to text Parker's mom that he's home, safe and sound. Trust is

an important concern, and she understands how precious her cargo is to the families who use her business. "Every trip is an opportunity to earn their trust and that is the culture we are trying to create," she says. With one more eye on the gate to ensure

she's leaving Parker secure, Wolske pulls out onto the road and heads home.

To learn more about Yeller Cab or to book a trip, visit yellercab.com or call 503-309-0000.



Nikki Jardin is a Portland-based freelance writer who loves to write about people dedicated to making the world a better place for all beings. When she's not writing, she's either exploring the great outdoors, traveling, or volunteering with Fences For Fido, a local nonprofit dedicated to giving dogs freedom from a previously chained life.

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