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Nancy Cowen, falconer and author, dies from COVID complications

By Ray Duckler The Concord Monitor
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"Banner," a 5-year-old female Falcon, poses on the hand of her handler, Nancy Cowan. Cowan, of Deering, died earlier this month of COVID complications.
Alan L. MacRae / The Concord Monitor

Before they arrived at his parents' house in Deering, Jim Cowan warned his future wife that his mother and father were unique.

Elizabeth waved it off as something unspectacular, a quirky trait that Cowan saw as embarrassing. Sure enough, though, the couple pulled into the driveway and saw Nancy Cowan out front, wearing a protective vest, thick gloves and a whistle around her neck, charging toward the car in a panic, yelling, 'Don't get out, don't get, don't get out!'

Once quiet, with Elizabeth still digesting the greeting, Nancy continued teaching her survival class for raptors. A falcon emerged from a tree, killed a quail on the driveway and ate it, right there on the spot.



Then, once the falcon had gained valuable hunting experience, Nancy turned to Elizabeth and said, “Hello, I’m Ms. Cowan. Nice to meet you.”

Those are the types of stories Nancy Cowan leaves behind. She died earlier this month from COVID-19, which affected her lungs. She was 74.

She was known nationally as a top falcon trainer, called a Master Falconer, and the connections she and her husband, Jim Cowan III, had with animals in general put Dr. Dolittle to shame.

The younger Jim Cowan lives in Maryland and acted as a spokesperson from the family’s home in Deering. He relayed his mother’s impact, a list of accomplishments and services related to animals that extend like a pterodactyl’s wingspan.

Nancy opened the New Hampshire School of Falconry 17 years ago, caring for injured raptors and running it from the couple’s home in Deering. It remains the state’s only school of its kind.

She made headlines that stretched to England eight years ago when a Lanner falcon in her care named Banner became the first hawk in history to undergo successful laser cataract surgery.

(Banner still lives at the Cowan home in Deering and feels great.)

Well before that, she met Shetland ponies at her grandparents’ farm in Kansas as a little girl. That was the spark. The animal world in the Granite State would never be the same.

Nancy combined a Sahara-dry sense of humor, the one that Elizabeth experienced two decades ago, with laser-sharp focus, her son said.

“She did nothing halfway,” Jim said. “She always had a full-time job when she was doing all these hobbies, but there was never an off switch with Nancy.”

Her energy and passion branched everywhere, sometimes arbitrarily.

“When we were growing up, she decided to make maple syrup,” Jim said. “We’re out there tapping trees in our yard so she could boil it.”

She was a horse trainer, a riding instructor and a champion showjumper. Pregnant, she cared for monkeys, lions and elephants at a zoo. She raised and trained sled-dog teams, lobbied state legislators to legalize the training of flying birds of prey in New Hampshire.

And while she couldn’t pull a Dr. Dolittle and actually talk to the animal



“An elephant at the zoo didn’t like the handler and smashed him into the wall,” Jim said. “She backed up the elephant to get it away from the handler, and it never touched her.”

But Nancy, with plenty of assistance from her husband, will forever be connected to raptors. Especially falcons and their interaction with the children who visited their school. Gloved and safe to accept a landing from this graceful air force, the kids had the opportunity to see these birds up close. Children with autism, Jim said, came alive with wonder.

Nancy and Jim gained more attention through magazine pieces, a TV documentary and a promo on Netflix. Famed Granite State author and naturalist Sy Montgomery, one of Nancy’s first students at her school of falconry, included Nancy in one of her books on birds. The two stayed close for 30 years.

Meanwhile, Montgomery inspired Nancy to write her memoir. Called “Peregrine Spring,” the book, a New York Times bestseller, chronicled the 30 years she’d spent learning about and caring for falcons and hawks.

That was published in 2016. COVID was still four years away. Nancy had started writing a sequel to her book before she died. She had more to teach, show and learn.

COVID wouldn’t allow it. Nancy was admitted to Concord Hospital just after Christmas. COVID led to pneumonia. Her lungs had become scarred.

“Most of the time it was either breathe or talk, or breathe or eat,” Jim said. “Her lungs had no reserve air for anything else.”

She taught more than 1,000 students at her school. She used to visit Hopkinton High School, home of Hawks.

She’d wear the school’s mascot costume, the one with wings, and she’d have her photo taken with the seniors on the school’s football team.

She was different.

Just ask Elizabeth Cowan.

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