

Stella, The Ferret That Changed My Life

Bob Church talks about how he got hooked on ferrets and about Stella, the ferret that changed his life.

By Bob Church

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Thanks to a special ferret he met years ago, Bob Church is now a firm ferret advocate.

I have tried to stumble upon the singular reason why I like ferrets. OK, I don't just like ferrets; I adore them. I am offended when they are treated unfairly, or maligned, or simply dismissed by bungling bureaucrats or uneducated legislators. I get upset when I see otherwise intelligent people resort to supposition or assumption when explaining ferret problems, or worse, to attack them.

I have surprised people with my passion for ferrets; you can see it in their eyes as they search for an exit. They have seen my eyes narrow, my voice rise, and my face redden when I discuss things that harm — or even potentially harm — ferrets. I have to force myself to calm down and apologize for my outbursts. Because I speak at a lot of ferret shows and events, I must continuously remind myself to take a mental Prozac when certain ferret-related subjects are broached. At times, that passion has offended people, causing me to lose friends and challenge political ties, but those concerns rarely enter my mind. I defend ferrets as I would my own children. That is how much I love these carpet sharks.

An Introduction To Ferrets

Those times I am licking my wounds after a passionate defense of something ferrety and belatedly realizing I have offended yet another friend, I revisit to the question of why I love ferrets so. I always return to Texarkana, Texas, 1986. I was working for the local newspaper and had taken my young family shopping at the local mall. It was there that I spotted my first ferret — a thick tube of an albino hob, stained yellow, stinking to high heaven, and wallowing in pine chips while playing with a tattered chew toy. I was curious. I was fascinated. I was hypnotized. I was broke and could not afford the little guy. It was then I realized two things: photojournalists do it for love and not money, and ferrets were special.

I eventually got a ferret, but I was so busy that my interactions were minor. It was just another pet; I took care of it for ethical reasons, not because of emotional ties. Because of the demands on my time, others gave much of that care. Yes, ferrets were fun to watch, but so was that game on that newfangled Commodore 64.

Several things happened to change that limited perspective. I retired from photojournalism — returning to academics to earn degrees in anthropology and biology — and was in graduate school. I became profoundly ill and was forced from pursuing my goal by a succession of surgeries and medical treatments. They left me weak and barely able to cope with everyday life, and scholastic endeavors became a luxury. Some procedures were devastating. At one point, I went a month without food or water. Enter Stella.

The Ferret That Changed My Life

Stella was a wisp of a ferret, with freckles instead of a mask, and a blaze on her head that was strangely shaped like a bolt of lightning. She was not the sharpest thorn on the rose bush, if you get my meaning. Stella ate cat kibble, was neutered early and eventually developed adrenal disease, insulinoma, cardiomyopathy and lymphoma. When she crashed, I held her in my arms as we rushed her to the vet. We were scarcely a mile from my home when she passed on. It was the first time I wept for an animal.

Stella opened my mind and heart to the realization that an animal could find importance equal to others of my own species, my own community, my own circle of friends, and even my own family. In short, I learned I could love a tiny little ferret as much as anyone else. As I wiped my eyes and blew my nose, I realized Stella had been part of my family, and I just couldn't spare her.

Not just Stella; I soon recognized I didn't have any ferrets to spare. Stella had found that dead spot in my heart and brought it back to life. She didn't just entertain me; she enjoyed me. She wasn't just an animal I had to care for, but an animal that cared for me. When I had surgery, she pined, lost weight and developed a urinary infection. When I came home, she somersaulted into the water dish and, while stuck on her back, war danced and ran with her feet in the air. Stella loved me with affection readily apparent to onlookers.

I usually tell people my preoccupation with ferrets stems from my medical problems and that I have nothing better to do. It



is little white lie I tell so I don't have to try and explain that I do it because of a little gray and white fluff that used to sleep on my chest, curled up into a little tiny furry doughnut. I do it for Stella. She opened my world and eyes to possibilities and feelings I never thought could exist. She taught me truths I had heard of, believed in, and was taught about in Scouts and church, but had never fully understood.

Without words, without language, without the ability to even open a door, Stella taught me that life is just so much better when you can share it with someone you love. Because of that gift, I dedicate my energy and intellect toward understanding ferrets more, so I can help in some modest way to make their lives better. That is the source of my passion for ferrets and why I will argue and plead and demand and debate and make myself look ridiculous and silly as long as there is a tiny glint of a chance it will help ferrets. Even if I could help them all, it could not begin to equal the gift Stella gave me.

To see all of Bob Church's columns, [click here](#)>>Bob Church is a former photojournalist and current zooarcheologist with degrees in biology (zoology) and anthropology (archaeology). He resides in Missouri with 19 ferrets that keep his chicken blender overheated and his heart overfull.