



Taking Care of Animals Starts with People - Don Critchlaw, Sparta's Animal Control Officer

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SPARTA, NJ — Sparta's dense woods are full of wildlife, as large as black bears and as small as mice. One common visitor to these parts is the town's animal control officer or ACO, easily identified by his long, well-coiffed blonde hair.

Don Critchlaw has been an ACO for 30 years, the last 20 of them in Sparta. His ability to get along with animals and people alike have been key contributors to his longevity.

"Don is like an animal whisperer," Lt. John Lamon, Critchlaw's supervisor, said. "If you had a wild coyote, it would come to Don, sit and offer his paw."

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People say they feel the same way. "We love Don," Garret Barcheski, the director of Sparta's local animal shelter, said. "You just want to hug him."

Critchlaw fills a drab conference room at the Sparta Police Department with an energy you expect from someone on his first day at work. His uniform is impeccable, with no evidence of a recent skirmish. That isn't always the case.

"I've been bit by so many things, but it doesn't bother me," Critchlaw said early in the interview. "It's a fun job. I enjoy the hell out of it."

Even unfriendly animals give Critchlaw a thrill, including bats that he captures and removes from local homes.

"They've got really sharp teeth, always hissing at you, and I show people that," he said, a huge smile on his face, eyes wide open. "That's the fun part of the job," he said.

Every species requires a different technique.

"Just leave them alone," Critchlaw said, offering advice on how to deal with bobcats.

But when necessary, Sparta's ACO dives in – literally.

"The bear cub is going to make a lot of noise, look for mom," he said to police officers before diving into a dumpster to retrieve the animal.

While that cub did squeal, many animals react positively to Critchlaw.

"Dogs look at him differently," Barcheski, the director of Father John's Animal House, said. "Other officers carry themselves more like alpha males, which brings tension."

Despite three decades on the job, Critchlaw remains keenly interested in the animals that cross his path, including a three-foot alligator, captured underneath a grill.

"He was so friendly," Critchlaw said about the alligator. "Did you know they grow one foot per year, I didn't know that," he said, curiosity on full display.

Critchlaw gets along with the people in his professional network, describing them in a similar manner as the friendly alligator.

Wildlife officers? Great!

Shelter employees? Fabulous!

Police officers? Fun loving!

Critchlaw also has a good relationship with the people he serves.

"Don is very good with residents," Lt. Lamon, 61, said. "Not one complaint in four years as his supervisor."

Lt. Lamon stressed how well Critchlaw knows the locals, pets and people. "Many strays don't make it to the shelter because Don knows where they live," he said.

Critchlaw's secret to dealing with Spartans? "Kill them with kindness," he said. As one example, he issues the public approximately 16 warnings for every one summons.

Sparta's ACO also tries to protect local pet owners when returning an animal home after being killed by a car.

"I prepare the animals, so owners don't have to see that," he said.

When asked if residents had room for improvement when it came to animals, Critchlaw squinted and looked around the room, as if answers were hidden in corners.

"How do you hit a moving rock," Critchlaw said about cars hitting turtles, shrugging his shoulders the way one does when asking a question with no immediate answer.

"Don is an extremely valuable part of our Sparta team, we are very fortunate to have him," Sparta Chief of Police Neil Spidaletto said about Critchlaw's contributions as ACO.

Critchlaw's success is not a surprise to his fellow ACO's, given his personal characteristics.

Carol Tyler, the northern director of the state's ACO association, stressed the need for ACOs to like animals.

"I don't want to be gross, but you really have to like animals," Tyler said. "They are going to bite you, pee on you, vomit on you, bleed on you or slobber all over you."

Anthony Lena, the association's president, said that ACOs must also deal effectively with a "spider-web" of people, including residents, government wildlife staff, shelters and law enforcement.

According to Tyler and Lena, approximately 75% of people who start in animal control drop out within five years because they lack one or both of these qualities. Those that stay last a long time. Lena and Tyler have been on the job for 18 and 38 years, respectively.

"I'll miss the people and the animals," Critchlaw said, contemplating his planned retirement in five years, giving him 35 years as an ACO. Stepping away from his ACO role will allow him to spend more time with his wife, Theresa, and his children, Amanda, 34, a nurse, and James, 35, who owns an auto repair shop. Both kids live nearby.

In the meantime, Spartans can expect to see Critchlaw in the woods.

"You can't mistake that hair," Barcheski said. "He's an iconic image."

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