

Animal sanctuary honors girl slain in Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting

Jennifer Hubbard of Newtown, Connecticut, shares with her audiences and readers what it's like to find hope and restored footing in the wake of darkness.

"I think that so many times when we are in dark moments and at the end of our rope and feel like there's nothing left, that's when we have to trust that God will provide what we need," she said.

What she needed more than anything was a way to deal with her grief and ongoing healing from the loss of her 6-year-old daughter, Catherine, one of 20 children slain on Dec. 14, 2012, at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

It was a challenge that no parent should have to face. In the thick of that darkness, she looked to the example of Mary.

"Her *fiat* was rooted in a lot of sadness and grief, yet the promise that God made to all of us is ours to claim," Hubbard said. "It's a promise that I have trusted in and lived with for more than six years – that he will always protect us, provide for us and will always heal us. I made choices to trust in God's promises, and I hold them closely."

Compassion to all creatures

Establishing the Catherine Violet Hubbard Animal Sanctuary in the girl's honor was part of that difficult journey forward.

Catherine aspired to "do something to take care of animals" when she grew up. She never got the chance. On that fateful day, a very disturbed teenager murdered his mother, then went

to the elementary school, where he gunned down 20 children and six staff members.

Jennifer and Matthew Hubbard requested in their daughter's obituary that donations in her memory were to be made to the Newtown Animal Center, a gesture that would have been dear to Catherine's heart. Her mother described Catherine as a kind and caring child who showed compassion to all creatures, from insects she could hold in her hand to furry friends she could hug.

"Catherine wanted them to know that they could trust her and that she would keep them safe from harm," Hubbard said.

Two years later, the couple founded the nonprofit sanctuary as a way to continue their daughter's legacy.

The 34 acres in Newtown were donated by the state of Connecticut. The parcel of farmland has woodlands, rolling meadows and a bank barn that was renovated for future use. A capital campaign is raising money for additional construction. Meanwhile, educational and other programs are held in available spaces, and several projects are up and running.

The sanctuary works with rescue groups and has found forever homes for over 300 animals. They have educated more than 10,000 children through compassion and science-based programs that teach how to care for animals and to be responsible stewards of the environment.

The organization also runs The Senior Paws Project to help senior citizens with food, supplies and medical support for their pets.

"We found that for a lot of seniors, pets are an important part of their mental health and well-being, but when they come up against hard times, the first thing to go is their pets," Hubbard said. "They should not have to make those choices. We help them with what they need, and we also provide temporary

foster care.”

Another project, Catherine’s Cups of Kindness, is a charitable initiative for volunteers of all ages to spread kindness and raise money for the sanctuary by hosting a beverage stand.

“Our hope is that patrons feel encouraged to pay that kindness forward with a donation to help us provide care for animals in need of healing and support,” Hubbard said.

Future plans call for expanding and adding facilities, and housing animals that are not companion animals. The commitment is to improve the lives of all creatures.

Trusting in God

Hubbard has been able to accomplish what’s already been done by trusting in God.

“I think that when people are truly at their weakest it means that the dawn will be truly bright,” she said. “In those moments, when someone says that it’s time to surrender it all to God’s will, it’s then that we have to trust that he will provide what we need. The question everyone has to ask themselves is are they open to seeing what God is willing to give them in so many instances, in so many places?”

Hubbard shares her personal journey and the progress of the sanctuary on the website cvhfoundation.org.

In one blog post, she writes about the night Catherine died, when the sky looked like a canvas painted black and poked with tiny pinholes that allowed a twinkle of light through. Hubbard’s father had taken her outside to see the sky, telling her that the stars were glimpses of heaven, and Catherine had joined the choir of angels there. She crumbled in his arms. In another entry, she writes about when the family begins to mark time as “before Catherine died.”

She shares her faith, too, through essay contributions to the monthly magazine published by Magnificat, A Ministry to Catholic Women. She's spoken at their breakfasts and at other events, bringing her testimony of how God continues to fulfill his promises of protection, provision and healing for all.

"I tell them that when they pray the Our Father – 'thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven' – they'll be trusting that God is going to provide us joy," she said. "It will come, maybe not in our timing, but it will be there."

Hubbard does not speak for her husband when others ask about his journey. It is his, she said, and they try to keep their son, Freddy, from the spotlight. He was in third grade when the gunman started shooting and was able to run to safety. It has affected him considerably, Hubbard said, "but he's remarkable and has incredible faith and a beautiful relationship with the Lord."

'Good will come'

Making the decision to found the sanctuary was not easy.

"It's a constant reminder of what happened," she said, "and that part for me is sad. But when you see it come to life and the support of the people who come along beside us, that reminds us that people are really good, and that good will come if we allow it."

Hubbard prayed and prayed that Catherine would walk out of the firehouse where the survivors had been taken.

"There's nothing more that I want than to have her here with me today," she said. "That didn't happen. But there have been so many good things that I have encountered that if I had wallowed in what happened and stayed stuck on the fact that Catherine died on that Dec. 14, I would have missed them. What a great tragedy it would have been if I had missed out on the blessings I have encountered over the past six years."

Maryann Gogniat Eidemiller writes from Pennsylvania.

Ecological stewardship at the sanctuary

The Catherine Violet Hubbard Animal Sanctuary hosts events throughout the year, including the Sunday at the Sanctuary – Bees, Beetles, Butterflies, and Blossoms – A Day of Pollination, on Sept. 22 from 12-3 p.m. During the day:

- A monarch butterfly expert will teach participants how to catch and tag butterflies for Project Monarch as the butterflies begin their long migration to a single mountain in Mexico.
- A beekeeper will introduce visitors to beekeeping and offer sample honeys from varying native flowers.
- An entomologist will help participants explore and uncover beetles in the sanctuary's meadows.
- And the importance of planting native flowers to support pollination will be discussed.

Registration is requested at cvhfoundation.org.