

Coney Island History Project Oral History Archive

Interviewee: Stanislav Baev

Interviewer: Julia Kanin

<https://www.coneyislandhistory.org/oral-history-archive/stanislav-baev>

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Julia Kanin: This is the Coney Island History Project, my name is Julia Kanin and today we are talking to Stanislav Baev, the president of American Alliance for Protection of Animals. Stanislav, please tell us a little about yourself, where you came from, and about your life in Russia.

Stanislav Baev: Good day, Julia. I was born in Moscow. I lived there for quite a short period of my life – for just one year because I was born into a military family. My father was a colonel. And after a year of living there, we immediately moved to a military town on the border with Finland. As far back as I can remember I have lived in Siberia, in Novosibirsk, so I consider myself a Siberian.

JK: How and when did you immigrate to the USA?

SB: I immigrated to the USA in 2006 through family reunification. My mother lived here already; she had been living here since '99. She came first and then brought me here.

JK: Did you immediately move to Coney Island or did you travel to other cities?

SB: No, I've been living in Brooklyn all the time. At first, I lived in Bensonhurst, on Avenue O and West 8th. Then I lived on Nostrand for a very short period of time, for about two months probably – on Nostrand avenue and U. And since I met my wife, we moved to Benson [Benson Avenue in Bath Beach], where we lived for about three years. I have been living at Coney Island Luna Park [housing complex] for the last two years.

JK: What are your impressions of Coney Island?

SB: I like it. I like it a lot. The ocean is close by. There are a lot of Russian speaking people. There are my favorite Russian stores. Nice food. The historic amusement park.

JK: Isn't it noisy there? You mentioned you live at Luna Park [apartments], it's probably very noisy, considering many tourists there? No?

SB: In summer – yes. Fireworks... I've always loved fireworks until I moved to Coney Island. I grew tired of it a little.

JK: What do you like most about Coney Island?

SB: The beach.

JK: The beach. Do you often visit it in summer?

SB: Very rarely. This year I probably visited it four or five times. I believe it's a lot because last year I didn't visit at all. But the fact that I can always gaze at the water from the window helps me sometimes to calm down.

JK: Tell me, how did the idea to create the American Alliance for Protection of Animals come about and how long has this organization been around?

SB: This organization was founded in 2019. We received the charity status 501 (c)(3) on July Fourth. And this idea came with my own, not the most pleasant experience, when we bought a dog, when I bought a dog for my wife as a gift. On May 9, 2018, I woke up... and before that, my wife kept saying that she wanted a dog. On May 9th I went online, started searching for a store. If you want a dog -- [and] you live in America-- if you want a dog, you just go on and buy it. I found a store with good ratings on Google. It was in Bensonhurst. I went [there], picked a nice little Pomeranian, and brought him home. And I will be honest, this dog changed my life. It helped me to become outgoing. I don't know, it was very difficult for me to communicate with people, to meet new people. And it was hard to trust. I can say that I was not a particularly social person. I had a very small circle of acquaintances I was meeting up with and this dog helped me to be more outgoing. And after probably seven months, after we had bought the dog, he clearly started having problems with an eye. At first, we thought he had strabismus. We brought him to the vet. The vet referred us to the dog ophthalmologist. It's very hard to make an appointment with a good ophthalmologist. Appointments are constantly being cancelled or rescheduled. We drove to Long Island. I did research beforehand that if it's just strabismus, then resection of the eye gland is performed, it just requires more thorough care and application of ointments. When we came to the vet, he said, "Guys, that's not what you think." He had a hereditary eye defect. His eye never developed, and his eye lens was in liquid form. There was an infection forming already and if the eye wasn't removed, then infection could have spread to the other eye, or caused a brain tumor. I remember sinking on the chair, grabbing my head, and that was the day I changed. I started looking, doing research about the store. Who is the owner? How did it happen? Because I was the type of a man who could come to the store and give them a hard time. I went there once, I wanted to talk to the owner. I was told "come the next day." I left. I started doing research about this store and I found many stories, many stories with bitter endings, when people were buying pets, which were dying a few days later. There was also a story about a boy who was 13 years old. He was saving money for a year. He came to the store, he bought a small Yorkie, he brought it home. This Yorkie died two days later from the virus. He came back to the store to collect his money. There's a law, 'the Pet Lemon Law,' which allows you to either get the money back, or take another animal, or the person who sold you this animal has to partially cover the veterinary treatment cost. He was given another dog. He brought it home. That dog died from the same virus a few days later. I was shocked, to be frank. This is how I found out about the puppy mills -- "conveyor belt" puppies. This is a big, big problem in America. And thanks to my wife, who said to me in time "Stasik, it doesn't make sense to crush the store, we have to crush the problem." This is how we decided to start the organization.

JK: There is information on your website about a protest against these puppy mills, which took place in February of this year. Did you manage to prevent the owners of such stores from selling the animals? Were there any results?

SB: To be honest, when we organized this protest, there were 35 people at the peak of the protest. We were guarded by the police. We, as an organization, wanted to do everything correctly and nicely. You don't need any permits in order to organize a protest. You have a right to protest. But we got a permit for a loudspeaker, we invited the media, and the police also provided us with security. And I'll be honest, while we were standing there and telling people the stories about this store, people still were coming in to buy dogs. And they even stood and smiled at us from the store. It's not a store problem. The stores, pet shop owners, these are just greedy people who just want to make a profit with the help of sick dogs, whom they buy very, very cheaply. And the problem is actually much deeper, much higher. And we have to fight it. We have to fight for animal rights. Then I think it'll help. As for the fight with the store... Yes, we can pressure them. Yes, the stores are not afraid of either the Department of Agriculture or the Department of Health, let alone police. They are afraid of the media because it kills their reputation. But again, while we are fighting the store, we, as a non-profit rescue organization, are not making any money. So, we spend a lot of energy on such protests, a lot of financial resources, and I'll tell you honestly, it can be done indefinitely. And while we are pressuring them, they already got a license in their brother's or sister's name. It will take only two months, and if we spend this time, spend a lot of resources and energy, close him... He will just lay low, but in two months it will be opened on the same spot with the same name and the same tactic.

JK: The government has no way to hinder these organizations, these people?

SB: It can, it doesn't want to. Because recently there was a bill to ban the sale of animals in pet stores, such as cats, dogs, rabbits, in the state of New York. California has long had such a law. In California, you are not allowed to go to the store and buy a dog from a breeder. I think, all these puppy mills... What is a puppy mill? This is a hangar in the middle of Texas, Arkansas, Missouri [with] hundreds of dogs in the field, keep giving birth, giving birth, and giving birth. There are just a few people who take care of them. There is no veterinary care, there is nothing. There is no hygiene, so to speak. Nothing. An animal is in terrible, terrible condition. Many have health issues. And a sick dog will never be able to give birth to a healthy puppy. And this is the problem. Because nobody takes care of these dogs. And I think that the government has to do something about it, because these situations affect people's mental state. These stories change people. They change someone for the better, someone for the worse. Because a lot of people in New York get a dog as emotional support. And many don't even know about puppy mills, that this thing exists. And many people when... an animal is the best medicine. For depression, for loneliness. I'm telling you, animals even help fight addiction, all sorts of addictions. And when a person who really needs an animal as emotional support doesn't have enough financial resources to get the best veterinary care for his dog... Because veterinary care is very expensive in New York. And when the animal starts falling ill, and he does not have the resources to help the animal, the animal begins to suffer. And when that person sees it with his own eyes, he might not even realize it yet, but psychologically

that person begins to suffer together with that dog, which might affect his mental health in the future.

JK: Why do people continue buying and helping, so to speak, these businesses, given the fact that there are so many victims, and probably there is some publicity, such as online reviews. Why do they keep buying? Because they don't know this information, or they think they're going to be lucky?

SB: A lot of people they don't know what it is. And I don't judge them because I was the man who just went to the store and bought a dog. And I learned this lesson from my own experience. It's just, I think I channeled this rage, anger in the right direction. And I think this is an immigration problem. Americans know about puppy mills, that such things exist. And they should be given credit for the fact that they prefer adoption instead of buying. They prefer to rescue an animal rather than buy it. And immigrants like myself, also Hispanics, they come, and they don't know that something like that could happen. And of course, everyone wants a cute little dog, a small, cute breed. And it is easier to buy it in the store because they know how to attract customers. This is how it's done. And you know, word of mouth is the best advertisement. When people see that he has a nice little dog. Where did you get that from? Where did you buy it? Over there, over there. And when he gets there, if he is not lucky, then the most benign thing that might happen, I believe, is that person spending a lot of money on treatment. And the worst thing is that it will affect his health, his mental health. Because in our case the whole family suffered, everyone was in tears. Because it's such an innocent animal, he just turned one year old, and his eye was already taken out.

JK: How do you find animals that need help?

SB: Mostly, people call us. They say they have kittens in the backyard. Also, there are a lot of people who feed animals. They say, for example, they've got a friendly, but very sick cat in the colony. Or just a friendly cat. Can you please help him? If an animal is friendly, not feral, we always try to catch them. First thing we do is go through the veterinary process (get rid of fleas, parasites). Then we do vaccines, such as FVRCP and Rabies, microchip, neuter and find them a home.

JK: Are there any veterinary clinics that help you in this case with treatments?

SB: Yes, there are a couple of clinics we work with here in Brooklyn. The first clinic is Animal Clinic of Bay Ridge and Dr. Ibrahim. And the second clinic is the Sheepshead Bay Veterinary Group, Dr. Sheynberg. They offer us great discounts, so to speak, which allows us to treat animals, because again, veterinary care is very expensive here. And I just have to give them the credit, I bow down to them, so to speak, and I'm very grateful for it. Because these two doctors care. There are veterinary clinics in New York where you can come in and you go through various necessary tests, which you basically don't even need in order to diagnose. But I think, a doctor should be a good diagnostician and be able to diagnose without any tests.

JK: Do you manage to help everyone?

SB: Unfortunately, no, not everyone. Especially because we have limitations. We are limited in foster care. We are limited by our budget. And we can't help everyone. If we had a lot of fosters, if people understood what foster care is, what it's like to be a foster, how it's such an essential help, then we would probably have had a greater impact. Or we had a shelter, then we would have had a bigger effect. We could rescue many more animals. At the moment, in order for us to rescue an animal, we have to find a foster first. If we had a shelter, we would have rescued an animal first, and then we would have looked for a foster.

JK: So, you're looking for a foster first in order for an animal to have a place somewhere, right?

SB: Absolutely, yes.

JK: Do you rescue only cats, or dogs, or maybe other animals?

SB: There's a big problem with cats in New York. Very big. This means there are cats on every corner here. Especially kittens. We had a crazy kitten season because due to the pandemic ASPCA didn't do surgeries, we worked with private vets, which cost us more. Even though they offer us very good discounts. It was challenging, I can say.

JK: What about the dogs needing help, maybe some other animals, like escaped parrots?

SB: So far, in our experience, we have not caught a single parrot. But we rescued dogs. We have a contract with Animal Control and Care. We are partners with them in a program New Hope. And we recently rescued a dog, it was possibly hit by a car or something, it had a paw fracture. And even though we have a small budget, we risked and took it in. And we got lucky because the surgeon said that this dog just needs to rest. It is at our foster Natalia's at the moment, who lives here, in the Coney Island area. And once it recovers, he has been vaccinated already, we will neuter it and start looking for a family.

JK: Do you have many volunteers helping?

SB: I would say, yes. It's such an idea. And there are many people in America, especially in the Coney Island area, we have some very good fosters. Again, it is Natalia, it's Roma and Lusya, who have four animals at once. Four or five because if we are saving kittens, it's rarely just one kitten, because we rescue the whole family. That is, if there is a litter of five kittens, we take all of them. And if there's a feral mom, a wild mom, we catch her too, we spay her and let her go.

JK: Do you only help in Brooklyn or all over New York?

SB: I'll tell you that mostly yes, we help in Brooklyn. But there are cases where we've helped people in Pennsylvania, we've helped people in New Jersey to find placement for their animals, which they had also rescued, treated. Someone abandoned animals, we even came to Pennsylvania and brought them from there.

JK: Are there any recent happy stories that you remember?

SB: Every animal is a story. The last story was a rescue on Coney Island, on Neptune Avenue. We were trying to rescue the family. At first, we thought there were five kittens and a mother. We rescued three on the first day, we thought there were two more, but there were three more, which

we then attempted to rescue during the next two days. All in all, we spent three days, but we rescued all of them. It means we rescued six kittens, they are all undergoing veterinary care now, we got rid of fleas, dewormed them, and we are waiting for their first shots.

JK: Do you allow people to adopt only after vaccinations and treatments, right?

SB: That's our priority. It's very important to give a healthy animal to a healthy family. And our veterinary process is a little different. We are going against early vaccinations and early neutering. There are a lot of large organizations who vaccinate and neuter kittens, for example, at just two months old, which in the future, can affect their behavior, their health. We don't do it. At two months old our kitten gets its first shot, it's the first FVRCP booster. Many organizations do a yearly FVRCP booster. We do it the right way: three booster shots. That means a kitten should get three FVRCP boosters. It gets the first one at two months old, when we are certain it's healthy and there are no parasites, that everything is normal. After that, about three weeks later, it gets the second FVRCP booster, and after another three weeks, it gets the third FVRCP booster, Rabies, and a microchip. And after that we can allow foster to adopt. It means we are looking for a family, we sign up these people, they go through the interview, they fill out an application, we check their house where an animal will be placed, because we don't give it to just anyone. And when we find the family, we place it for foster to adopt, and when the kitten is about five or six months, we contact them, we schedule an appointment for neutering. People bring it, get it neutered, we cover the whole veterinary process. In full, it means that people don't pay for anything. Just the adoption fee.

JK: Do other organizations that are involved in animal rescue cooperate with you, maybe they also provide some help to you?

SB: Yes, there are organizations we are friends with. Of course, we would like to be friends with a larger number of organizations, especially when it relates to fighting for animal rights, because it's very important. There is an organization Rescue City, this organization exists longer. It's been around longer. There was a hoarding situation in Bensonhurst, where we pulled out about forty animals from the basement and this organization took all of them. There is also an organization Strays Hope for Life Rescue. They operate in Staten Island; we also contact each other often. For example, if there is a situation, they get a call and if this situation is in Brooklyn, they call us. And we help if we can. When we get a call, for example, and we have no place, then we ask to dial them, send people there, maybe they have available space. Because at the moment we're all filled. Sean Casey is doing a very good job; he has a shelter. I know Sean personally, but not very close. So, we're all trying, let's put it this way. But Strays Hope for Life, Rescue City, we're friends.

JK: As far as I know, you are involved in the trap-neuter-return program. Tell us about this program and how it works.

SB: Trap-neuter-return, abbreviated TNR, is the only humane way to reduce the population of stray animals. Per this program, again, stray animals are divided into feral and friendly. It's easier with friendly [ones.]. You just catch them, and you can immediately place them into foster care. Ferals cannot be placed into foster care because they have to be either in a recovery space or something. During TNR, a stray animal is caught, it is neutered, the animal is vaccinated with

FVRCP, Rabies, and then, after a recovery period (females four to five days, males two to three days). And after this time, they are released at the same place they were caught. But this animal cannot reproduce anymore, and ultimately it dies of natural causes when old.

JK: Are there any cat colonies at Brighton Beach and Coney Island?

SB: Plenty. Plenty! Especially in the Sea Gate area. We have a small park here on Shore Parkway, too, and now a colony wasn't able to form on Neptune and West 8th. We prevented it, we caught these kittens, it was six kittens. There were three boys, three girls. It means in about six months there would have been, for example, not six kittens, there would have been, probably, about 20 kittens. And then another six months later there could have been more than thirty kittens. And someone calls it a problem with stray cats in their backyard, we call it a timely missed colony.

JK: How do these cat colonies winter? It's very cold near the ocean in winter.

SB: Our manager, Evgeniya Gorshkova, she takes care of two colonies. So, four, or even five times a week, she goes out and feeds these animals every night. She places the insulated shelters for wintertime, where they can always warm up. And in winter, these animals mostly hide in warm places - basements, or it even happens that they climb under the hood of the car, where it is warm. And that's why in winter we specifically ask people to be especially careful before they, for example, start a car. Maybe they can listen if someone meows under the hood. Or they can look under the car to check if there is an animal. Because in winter an animal is looking for warmth.

JK: Is there a chance to socialize these cats that, let's say, were always on the street and never had any owners?

SB: Yes, there is. But only at a very young age. If you haven't done it until they're three or four months, then it's going to be very difficult. But we had such experience. It was a feral cat, I rescued her in Maimonides, her name is Simone. When we rescued her, she was nine months old and she was already pregnant. At first, we placed her into a foster care where there were also other animals. She looked around... an animal sees, the animal learns from other animals. It is very important, especially from kittens. When kittens are playing, and for example, a feral animal sees that they play, that no one harms them, they begin to relax. We have to earn their trust. But the best way to do it is when an animal, for example, is two or three months old. It will be much easier and faster, because if you do it, when the animal is already two years old, it can take at least a year.

JK: Are there any seasonal difficulties with helping the animals?

SB: I would say in summer, it's called the kitten season. It's when there are so many stray kittens. And it means a lot of calls. People call, they say, we have them in the backyard, in our yard. Kittens, kittens, kittens... And again, at this point, we slowed down a little, we went through adoptions. We got a little more time. But at this moment we have thirty animals. Mostly, we rescued them all in one month.

JK: In general, on average, how many animals do you have, how many do you manage to help in a month?

SB: Again...

JK: It depends on the season, right?

SB: Again, in fact, we can rescue up to thirty animals in a day. As easy as pie. If you help all the people, and rescue all these animals, you can rescue and twenty-thirty a day, it is very easy. We have a team that lives by this idea, and let's just say, shares this idea with us and we do our best, after work, before work. We do everything we can to make a difference.

JK: How do other people react when you tell them what you do? Friends or when you meet someone?

SB: Very, very positively. A lot of people are grateful, a lot of people also want to help. They are very positive about it. Some people are surprised, they say, "Whoa! Thank you for what you're doing. Wow! Are you helping animals?" Very positively. Very few people join us, of course. But again, people learn from their mistakes. Of course, we do our best to prevent people from repeating my mistakes. We try to teach because it is the most effective thing that can be. We have now launched, for example, the first training "Why it is better to rescue an animal than to buy an animal." We have uploaded a video on our YouTube channel, which can also be found on Facebook in our group American Alliance for Protection of Animals. We are also preparing the second video, what to do if you see, for example, because we have so many calls, especially about kittens, and we are now trying to get people to rescue kittens from the street, than buy them. But it's not enough just to rescue, because people are afraid, they don't know what to do. And our next video will be "What to do if you see a stray kitten."