

Vincent Priceless

► By Francis Battista

It was Palm Sunday morning at about 7:15. I was standing on the tailgate of the big Ryder truck waiting for the first team of volunteers to arrive. The truck was loaded with canopies, tables, chairs, signs, and other assorted stuff that would transform the grounds surrounding L.A.'s La Brea Tar Pits into a huge pet adoption festival. In 90 minutes, 33 organizations would be arriving with hundreds of waifs and strays in need of good new homes.

An amiable-looking fellow smiled at me as he entered the park. He was neatly dressed but had a bundle under his arm and a brown bag in hand that suggested someone who was living on the street. My wife, Silva, who was unloading more stuff from the trunk of our car, followed the man into the park. Knowing that we were about to surround him with hustle and bustle, she felt she should warn him and said, "Hi, we're going to be setting up a pet adoption event in the park," to which he responded, "Can I help?"

And so we met Vincent.

Vincent proved an able and confident volunteer. Silva gave him a proposed layout map of the event and he began working at her side as a squadron of roustabouts-for-a-day decanted the contents of the big truck into little trucks and from there to what would become the adoption booths around the two-acre park.

Silva, who always has serious reservations regarding delegation in such situations, found herself handing over more and more

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bits of paper to this homeless guy who eventually wound up with the entire master plan for the layout of the event while she took over troubleshooting any unexpected problems.

Vincent was clearly not the average stray that enters the Best Friends orbit! Rather than taking in the day at the end of a lead with an "Adopt Me" sign around his neck, this stray was graciously providing organization and leadership to a growing team of volunteer lawyers, teachers, entertainment professionals, and housewives. Our long-standing volunteers took to his easy manner and new volunteers were impressed by the high quality of our "team leader."

While we all enjoyed the irony of the situation, no one got more of a kick out of it than Vincent. When asked how long he had been with Best Friends, he told everyone that he had only met us that morning and was, in fact, homeless – a fact that he had previously been too embarrassed to admit to anyone since circumstances had landed him on the street a week earlier. Now, with his obvious competence and people skills speaking for him, his embarrassment and self doubts dissolved.

At one point, I jokingly asked him, "So, what's the deal, are you an out-of-work rocket scientist?" to which he chuckled before being recruited once again to sort out the next complication of the day.

Vincent worked through the event and handed me the checklist after the last chair was accounted for and loaded back on the truck sometime after dark. We went out for a bite to eat together and heard a fascinating story that started in rural east Texas and wound through a military career in Cold War Europe and the Middle East. As a

country boy, Vincent grew up around animals. In the service, he found new homes for dogs that were being cut loose by military personnel on the move. And during a stint in Turkey, he partnered in the adoption of former racehorses that had been saved from the slow death of a life pulling carts.

Multi-lingual and multi-talented, fate brought him to the gates of the Tar Pits Park on the right day for us and for him. There was a palpable sadness when we parted the following morning. Clouds were gathering and a storm was moving in. We were on our way back to Best Friends in Utah; our new friend was standing in the rain waiting for a bus to go to the unemployment office in South Central Los Angeles.

Back at the sanctuary, we hit the phones. Kind of like trying to find a foster home for that great dog you found running down the freeway, except that this stray needed more than a warm mat on the kitchen floor and a bag of kibble. He needed a job, too.

It took a few days and an amazing stroke of luck but the rescue community came through. As of this writing, Vincent is caretaker at a kennel facility while working on a new sanctuary that is taking shape in the hills north of L.A. Stray no more. 🐾