

MY TURN

Chickens deserve more respect

By **KAREN DAVIS**

For the Monitor

For those of us working on behalf of chickens, the conventional view that chickens are “just food” is daunting. The haunting images that fill our minds are utterly at variance with the festive attitude toward slaughter expressed by Barbara Stewart in “Farmwifery – Inside Job” (*Sunday Monitor* Home & Family page, April 27). Over the years, many people, including some who say they once thought they would never care about a chicken, have changed their minds after learning about the terrible suffering endured by billions of birds raised for meat – and after meeting some happy chickens who fortunately escaped that fate.

To help people better understand both the plight and delight of chickens, my organization, United Poultry Concerns, designated May 4 as International Respect for Chickens Day, beginning in 2005, and May as International Respect for Chickens Month. We celebrate the dignity, beauty and life of chickens and protest the bleakness of their lives in farming operations. As part of our effort, we invite people to visit our sanctuary on the Eastern Shore of Virginia.

Visitors who’d been led to believe that chickens are “adapted to captivity” are amazed at how joyfully our chickens, turkeys and ducks rush, and sometimes hobble, outside in the morning to start their day, after their doors are unlocked. Each of our birds has a story.

Take, for example, Chesterbuddy. He arrived at our sanctuary already a crippled little chick, so typical of chickens bred for the meat industry. But Chesterbuddy grew up to be a beloved rooster, very attentive to his hens and endearing to everyone who met him.

Each morning, we would lift him carefully out of his house and set him down like a prince in his favorite place under the tree in his special yard. When after little more than a year, he began to deteriorate so that he could no longer lift up his head without effort, we called our veterinarian to come to the sanctuary and put him to sleep. As he was dying, he began to chirp softly as though for the first time in his life he felt right and no longer burdened.

Chesterbuddy was living proof of the observation made by avian specialist, Lesley Rogers, in *The Development of Brain and Behaviour in the Chicken*, published in 1995, that increased knowledge of the behavior and cognitive abilities of the chicken has brought “the realization that the chicken is not an inferior species to be treated merely as a food source.”

The American colonial society historian, St. John



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United Poultry Concerns believes that chickens are too smart and have too much personality to be treated as food.

de Crevecoeur, held a similar view.

In *Letters from an American Farmer*, published in 1782, he wrote, “I never see an egg brought to my table but I feel penetrated with the wonderful change it would have undergone but for my gluttony: It might have been a gentle, useful hen leading her chickens with a care and vigilance which speaks shame to many women. A cock perhaps, arrayed with the most majestic plumes, tender to his mate, bold, courageous, endowed with an astonishing instinct, with thoughts, with memory, and every distinguishing characteristic of the reason of man.”

My own experience as a chicken sanctuary director for more than 20 years supports these viewpoints. Chickens are my friends, not my food. People who would like to learn more about chickens and United Poultry Concerns are encouraged to visit our website at upc-online.org.

(Karen Davis is the founder and president of United Poultry Concerns, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the compassionate and respectful treatment of domestic fowl.)