



Judge Ammons with members of a police escort on his last day as a judge.



Judge Ammons rides Buddy to his last day on the bench.

Slammin' Ammons's Softer Side: Retired Judge Has Always Loved Animals

by Deirdre Norman

If a man aspires towards a righteous life, his first act of abstinence is from injury to animals.

— Albert Einstein

On November 8, the Norfolk SPCA presented its first Thomas M. Ammons III Awards for Animal Welfare to five animal welfare advocates in Hampton Roads. The award is named for the retired Virginia Beach judge who earned the nickname “Slammin’ Ammons” for being hard on traffic violators and harder on people who mistreated animals.

In 1989, Ammons sentenced a man to jail for beating a kitten to death in his front yard – a case that made national news because many at the time thought two weekends in jail was too harsh a punishment.

Ammons says that wasn’t even the stiffest animal cruelty sentence he handed down: “I gave a guy a year in jail once for starving a dog to death in his apartment.

“It used to be that animals were considered property and you could do what you wanted with them. Fortunately, that’s no longer the case.”

In fact, lawyers across the United States have taken an increasing interest in animal law. According to the Animal Legal Defense Fund, there were only nine law schools with classes in animal law in 2000. By 2015, that number had swelled to 151.

At the University of Virginia Law School, Ammons's alma mater, Bob Barker of *The Price Is Right* gave \$1 million in 2009 to establish an animal law program. And in 2015, Attorney General Mark Herring created the nation's first Attorney General's Animal Law unit to assist law enforcement professionals with animal welfare cases and with stopping animal fighting and animal abuse.

According to Rob Blizard, executive director of the Norfolk SPCA, five of the organization's fifteen board members are attorneys. "It's not surprising. Law can do good for the world around us," Blizard says.

When asked why he thinks lawyers are drawn to animal causes, Ammons says, "I'm not trying to boast about lawyers, but I think the only trait that all lawyers share is intelligence. And intelligent people are drawn to helping animals. Many lawyers are also inclined to public service, and our careers give us a strong pro bono streak."

Ammons began volunteering at the Virginia Beach SPCA in 1988, and in 1989 he left behind a real estate practice to become a general district judge. "I never lost my ability to be shocked by what some people would do," Ammons says of his years as a judge. Ammons retired from the bench in 2005, and was featured in the *Washington Post* after he decided to go to court on his last day at work wearing a duster coat and a cowboy hat while riding his beloved black and white retired rodeo horse, Buddy, alongside a mounted police escort. "Six of us rode," Ammons recalls. "I wish I had done it every day."

Today Ammons still wears a bracelet made from Buddy's tail hair that he never takes off. He lives with a purebred yellow Lab named Ranger, who was given to him by a neighbor who could no longer care for the dog, and a somewhat famous shelter dog named Jack.

Jack was adopted from an Edenton, North Carolina, shelter and has become a philanthropist in his own right — donating a playground for dogs and 29 dog beds to his former shelter over the years. The Edenton



Judge Ammons with Ranger.

City Council also makes an effort to mention Jack's name in every meeting — often starting the meeting with "How is Jack doing?" or "How old is Jack now?" after Jack agreed to give \$100 to the shelter every time his name is mentioned.

Ammons says wryly, "Jack also agreed to donate \$200 every time they show his photo at a county commission meeting, but Jack is struggling now to keep up."

The Norfolk SPCA recently celebrated its 125th anniversary at an event where AG Mark Herring also received an award for his contribution to animal welfare, and continues to work daily to help the underserved people of Norfolk and their animals while using no taxpayer funds. Virginia lawyer board members of the Norfolk SPCA include President Steve Brinker of Crenshaw, Ware & Martin; Vice President Delphine Carnes, also of Crenshaw, Ware & Martin; Grant Kidner of Norfolk Southern; Ray King of LeClairRyan; and Beverlee Richter Tiger of Zubie Development.

Ms. Tiger is also a recipient of the inaugural Ammons Award for her work on a three-year project that endeavored to care for and ultimately find homes for a colony of unowned cats in a local industrial park. She says of the reasons lawyers are often drawn to helping animals, "I do think people who display a tough side in their work have a softer side toward animals because animals are defenseless."

Ammons concurs. "Animals teach us about love," he says. "We have a symbiotic relationship with them."