

Curiosity is the key to being an animal services officer

By Conner Cimmiyotti

I first heard the phrase, “curious, not furious,” years ago on a radio program. I don’t recall the speaker or the program, however, the example used to explain the phrase wasn’t novel. It’s commuting time, and you’re at a stoplight several cars back from the intersection. The light turns green and ... nothing. No movement. You give an initial courtesy honk. Other cars start in on the chorus. No longer are you thinking about the upcoming workday. Your focus has shifted to the driver responsible for such negligence. And then, everyone is moving. As you get to the intersection, you see an elderly person walking their grandchild to school who clearly just finished crossing the crosswalk. Oops. A feeling of embarrassment passes over you as you realize you were too quick to anger. Too quick to judge. Too quick to assume the worst without having all the facts.

As highly dedicated and passionate people, my fellow animal services officers and I respond to an array of calls regarding wild and domestic animals throughout the county. But no matter the nature, urgency, or circumstances, animal services officers must come into a situation without judgment, bias, or preconceived notions.

Showing up to a call with my mind already made up clouds my judgment. I might ask leading questions or only look for answers that confirm my bias. I might spend time thinking of the worst possible scenarios, getting myself worked up in the process. My frustration then might be apparent in my body language and tone, automatically putting someone on the defensive, only for me to find out that I didn’t have all the information before making up my mind about the person and the situation. The only thing I accomplish is looking like a jerk. And I miss the opportunity to help a pet guardian or an animal. At the end of the day, animal services officers are fact-finders, not arbiters of justice.

The neighbor who constantly allows their dog to run loose in the neighborhood? The inherent safety concerns of this may seem obvious, but I grew up in Alaska, where it was the norm for dogs to be let out and roam the neighborhood, so dogs being required to be kept on leash was completely new to me when I moved to California. A fellow hiker leaving food on a trail for wildlife? That hiker may have the best of intentions, and simply not know the dangers of feeding wildlife. (They also may not know that Marin Humane and WildCare are great resources for helping sick and injured wildlife!) A pet guardian living out of their vehicle? That person may have a stable income and receive support from Marin Humane’s Pet Safety Net, but recently lost their home in a natural disaster. These are just a few examples of calls we regularly respond to where we must remain mindful that without having all the information, it’s unjust to come into a situation with our minds already made. By getting a more complete picture of the circumstances, we can provide the best possible outcomes for both people and animals.

To be clear, I'm not justifying irresponsible pet ownership. There are municipal and state regulations that let us ensure animals are provided with their legal requirements. But many situations can be easily resolved with empathy, patience, and education once we have all the facts. We're all going through this crazy life together and we cannot assume the worst in others, or others will assume the worst in us.

So, next time you wait at a crosswalk for pedestrians, and no one honks at you, remember how nice it is that others are being curious, not furious.

Conner Cimmiyotti is an animal services officer with Marin Humane, which contributes Tails of Marin articles and welcomes animal-related questions and stories about the people and animals in our community. Go to marinhumane.org, find us on social media @marinhumane, or email lbloch@marinhumane.org.