

Jack Knox: Road-crossing chickens in hot water

BY JACK KNOX, TIMES COLONIST FEBRUARY 6, 2010



Brothers Kevin, left, and Ryan Hatam-Javanmardi with their pet chickens. The birds' wandering ways earned a \$50 fine from the city of Victoria.

Photograph by: Family, Times Colonist

Persecuted for her faith, smuggled out of Iran at age 14, Nooshin Hatam knows a bit about standing up for her beliefs. So when the Victoria woman's pet poultry ran afowl of the law, she drew a chicken scratch in the sand.

Last May, Victoria's Nooshin Hatam bought her sons, aged six and 10, a couple of one-day-old chickens as pets, just like the ones she had as a little girl in Tehran. She figured caring for the birds would teach the boys responsibility, and pry them away from the computer screen.

Sure enough, the boys took to the birds like, well, a duck to water. They defied gender in calling the hens Oliver and Cyrus, and also gave them Persian names that translate to Chubby and Chubbier. Treated their pets just like a dog, except you don't want to scramble or fry what the dog leaves on the lawn.

Ah, but Oliver and Cyrus had a sense of wanderlust, occasionally exploring their Lang Street neighbourhood or going for a hike in Summit Park, only to return each evening -- right up until September, when the birds didn't come home one night. Or the next.

Hatam's husband, Vafa Javanmardi, began knocking on doors, and soon discovered that animal-control officers had plucked the critters from the streets. It cost \$27 to bail them out of poultry prison - a \$6-per-bird impoundment fee, plus \$2.50 a day each for food.

Javanmardi fenced off one side of the house with chicken wire, but on Oct. 8 the birds busted out, and got nabbed again by the animal-control officer, who this time wrote a \$50 ticket.

After that, Hatam found a farm in Saanich to take the birds. The boys miss their pets, and visit them each week, bringing their favourite treats -- chick peas, or Cheerios with milk.

As for Hatam, she's mad as a wet hen. Or as mad as a peace-loving Baha'i can get. Post-revolutionary Iran was a tough place to grow up for someone of her faith. (She commends you to Bahai.org.) She was just 14 when she escaped persecution, her parents paying a smuggler to spirit Hatam and her 18-year-old sister into Pakistan, an arduous journey completed partly on camel and foot. It was a year and a half later before their parents made it out.

So, yeah, standing up for what you think is right is important to Hatam, and she thinks it wrong that the city went after her two hens with such gusto. We're talking a couple of chickens here -- poultry, not pit bulls.

Neighbours' cats roam at will, do their business in her backyard, no big deal, she says. "Why would they make an issue about a chicken?"

If the city is going to allow chickens, it should show a little understanding when they get loose, she argues.

Victoria does indeed allow chickens. Since 1992, Victoria's Animal Control Bylaw has said you can keep all the hens you want (but no roosters) as long as they're contained, and as long as they're for personal use. (Sounds like medical marijuana.)

Other municipalities generally link the number of chickens to the size of the property. They're even allowed in Oak Bay, but only by permit, and not in the Uplands.

Occasionally, this urban agriculture makes the news. Almost 40 years ago, back in his long-haired days in Victoria, current federal cabinet minister Stockwell Day raised a couple of chickens in a derelict Plymouth parked behind his Hillside Avenue home. Every night he would walk them around the block, using a leash fashioned from bootlaces -- only to abandon his foray into farming after bylaw officers intervened.

The City of Victoria's Katie Josephson says the law treats poultry just like any other animal. Doesn't matter if they're chickens, dogs, or cats -- if they wander into the neighbour's yard, they're liable to be

hauled away. That said, chickens are generally a non-issue. "We get very few complaints."

The beefs tend to be car-related. "I don't know what it is about chickens, but they seem to stop traffic," Josephson said. (Q: Why did the chicken cross the road? A: It didn't. It just meandered around the middle.)

Enforcement of the Animal Control Bylaw is incremental. The first time chickens are found in the neighbour's yard, the owner must usually pay that impound fee and custody charge. Next time, the penalty steps up to the \$50 fine.

Which Hatam, her feathered friends now in exile, sees as a disproportionate response. She plans to fight her ticket in court this month.

"It's not about the money," she says. Fifty bucks? That's chicken feed.

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