

# **Dianne James, Wabash**

## **Protector of prairie dogs**

By Rosa Salter Rodriguez  
The Journal Gazette

When Dianne James was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2004, she says she had a secret weapon for fighting the disease – the love of her prairie dogs.

James began taking care of prairie dogs – in reality, not dogs at all but relatives of squirrels – while living in Rhode Island in 1998, when a friend of her daughter asked her whether she could adopt a prairie dog the little girl could no longer care for.

James knew next to nothing about prairie dogs at the time. But soon she found herself so enthralled with the creatures that she founded Prairie Dog Rescue of Rhode Island and was working with a local zoo, animal control officers and a knowledgeable vet to take in displaced or unwanted prairie dogs from around New England and find them permanent homes.

When she moved to a small Indiana farm in 2001, she continued her avocation, founding the Midwest Prairie Dog Shelter – The Last Stop, which she operates in conjunction with Carmel-based Indiana Proactive Animal Welfare.

A widow with two grown children, James has cared for up to 30 prairie dogs at one time. She now has 14 of her own, which she calls “The James Gang” and has named them after infamous outlaws and their cohorts.

Two of the gang’s original members – Jesse, the first animal she took in, and her much-beloved Frankie – passed away from complications of old age.

But James says they nonetheless “ministered to me on a daily basis” while she underwent surgery, six months of chemotherapy and 33 radiation treatments to battle breast cancer, which had spread to her lymph nodes.

James recently went back to work as an administrative assistant for a company that plans to produce ethanol in Marion. She now spends some of her free time advocating for prairie dog conservation, and she recently was named a Foster Parent of the Year by Indiana-PAW for her work fostering hard-to-place dogs, including a Katrina refugee.

Prairie dogs, James says, face an uncertain future. Because of their still-disputed role in the monkeypox outbreak in 2004, the federal government has banned transporting them and selling them as pets. The animals also face threats in their native habitats from people who view them as pests or impediments to land development.

James agrees that the animals don’t belong in pet stores. But she still calls her little band of burrowers “the loves of my life” and notes: “There is no love in all the world like the love of a prairie dog.”

**So, tell me, how did you learn how to look after prairie dogs when you got your first one?**

“Well, I had seen them in a local zoo and in Arizona, but I had never considered one as a pet. ... We had some vacation coming, so we got in the car, and I drove out to Denver and sat in the middle of a prairie dog town to observe their behavior and habits because I wanted him to be happy. ... And I found a Web site by Pat Storer, an expert who had written a couple of books, and I read them. But there wasn't much out there then.”

**So what do prairie dogs need to be happy? Do they need to live outdoors so they can burrow?**

“I live in the country on three acres of land, and in an ideal world, prairie dogs should live in natural conditions, but they live in my home. I don't have a dining room anymore. I have a prairie dog town. I have enclosures that are homemade – there are a few 3-by-6-foot enclosures and a 40-by-50-inch one, and there's one that's over 6 feet. And there are tunnels made out of tile drains, and I provide computer paper (for them to burrow in) and tons of hay – tons, literally. And they have 15-inch exercise wheels to play on. It's their home, and they love their home and their life.”

**When you talk about “love” from a prairie dog, I'm sure a lot of people wouldn't understand that. What do you mean?**

“They're very much like people. They're very social animals, and they live in families like people do. ... They need constant interaction – they're like a 2-year-old child. They're as vulnerable as a 2-year-old child, and as curious. And they listen about as well. (Laughs.) They'll follow you around the house, and will just sit in your lap. ... like a total lap dog. ... When I had breast cancer last year, they took care of me. You have days when you don't want to be around anybody, and they still want to be around you. You see the love from these animals, and it just gets you going. It might not make sense to some people, but it would make sense to an animal person.”

**I would imagine with the federal ban, there wouldn't be as much of a call for rescue and placement.**

“Yes, but people still move, get sick; kids develop allergies. There is still a need, and I'm approved both federally and locally (to take in animals). But I believe it's going to diminish over time.”

**Are you involved in any new projects?**

“I'm a member of The Prairie Dog Coalition, which is based in Colorado, and Dr. John Hoogland, who is a scientist who studies prairie dogs, and I just launched a project online called “101 Questions and Answers About Prairie Dogs: Ask a Prairie Dog Expert.” People can e-mail questions in and we'll answer them. ... I also have a Web site ([www.prairiedoglover.com](http://www.prairiedoglover.com)) with information, and where we have a care sheet and where I try to do education. I'd like to dispel myths. ... There's also people who do what I do in other countries, including Belgium and Germany, France, Canada, all over. I try to help them out with their rescue groups.”

**You said that you think prairie dogs have been unfairly implicated in the monkeypox situation. Can you explain a little more about that?**

“First, it didn’t originate in prairie dogs, which are indigenous to the United States. It originated in Africa, and was brought to this country by Gambian rats who were being brought in by pet dealers. Sick animals got into our borders, and the prairie dogs caught the virus in shipment and in a confined environment in a pet store in Chicago. But federal officials acted quickly to halt the spread of the disease in 2003. Monkeypox no longer exists in the United States, and it should stay that way, as long as we watch our borders.”

**So what do prairie dogs need these days from people?**

“They need a break! They are just the most misunderstood animals on the planet. They need people to get to know them up close and personal and find out what they’re about.”

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