

PHILADELPHIA, PA

PHILADELPHIA, PA THURSDAY, APRIL 19, 2001

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**Art Museum Area**

# HOME NEWS



**VOLUME 65 NO. 16**

 **STAR PUBLICATIONS**

**Thursday, April 19, 2001**

**250 W. GIRARD AVENUE, PHILADELPHIA, PA 19123-1538**

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# Amazing WOMEN

Ordinary women, extraordinary lives

by Carol Denker

Kerri Hunter-Woodman fills the 'Amazing Woman' bill in more than one way.

By trade, Kerri runs a pet sitting business. Kerri's Cat Care is so successful that she's won top honors in her chosen profession.

Kerri is also amazing in the way she handles her disease (she has MS, multiple sclerosis).

But after spending time with Kerri, the way she lives her life emerges as truly outstanding and noteworthy.

### Choices

How one reacts to the (seemingly) arbitrary events, good and bad, that enter one's life adds up to a way of life: a series of choices.

The choices that Kerri makes every day has forged her into one amazing woman.

Everyone can learn from her, since everyone has crosses to bear. If others handle their trials in anything like Kerri's transcendent style, they will be on the right track.

*Choose one:* Given a dose of bad luck, should you: A) Feel sorry for your-

self, or B) Have increased empathy for others?

The extent to which Kerri chooses 'B' sets an inspiring example.

### Living with MS

MS usually strikes young adults, seemingly out of the blue. No known cause. No known cure. And no known certain progression.

MS can cripple quickly, or can disappear (go into remission) for months. Or many years.



Kerri Hunter- talks about her latest project, at the Silk City Diner in Northern Liberties. /Carol Denker

The scary thing, says Kerri, is that MS can worsen anytime, attacking the muscular and nervous systems. She still looks great, her body moves the same.

It's not that Kerri doesn't suffer.

This past year was the worst yet since her 1998 diagnosis; suffering several flare-ups, Kerri was treated with steroids.

"I now have double vision about 80 to 90 percent of the time," Kerri said.

She described how she adjusts to the "window" of vision that remains open, and gets smaller with her fatigue.

MS has forced this extraordinarily active person to cut down on her many activities.

She doesn't like it. But Kerri speaks about living with MS up front, getting it out of the way. (And almost always matter of factly.)

### Empathy

When one talks to Kerri, one experiences her exquisite empathy for all creatures.

Tell Kerri a story; her eyes fill with tears.

Tell her about a female friend with MS, in total remission and no symptoms, who is presently cowering in the house, having cut out all activities.

After one, soft wistful, "Wow, she's lucky," Kerri says firmly: "What's her number, I'll talk to her."

It's not just people; all earthly creatures receive Kerri's loving protection.

A fierce empathy with all four-footed animals began in childhood, and led Kerri to her career.

"Someone has to feel for animals, and I believe I was predestined to do that," said Kerri.

During last year's MS

walk, Kerri was thinking of the dogs outside in the heat.

"I thought, oh, they must be so uncomfortable," she said, her eyes filling with tears, imagining the animals' suffering.

### Kerri's Cat Care

Kerri's love for animals led to Kerri's Cat Care, begun 12 years ago. The business grew quickly, soon including dogs, birds and other members of the animal kingdom.

Kerri said she worked, "Twelve hours a day, seven days a week."

In 1998, Kerri proudly achieved the pinnacle of professional success: she was inducted into the National Association of Professional Pet Sitters—the first inductee, based on her work record and contribution to the growing field.

## Full-out

**Choose one:** After being diagnosed with a scary disease, you A) Don't put your whole self into anything, or B) Continue to invest in projects with your whole heart.

Sure, 'B' sounds like the right one. But how many people really live that way?

Full-out: that's the way Kerri does everything. It's the way Kerri participated in the MS walk, the MS foundation's way of raising money.

Since her diagnosis, upsetting as it was initially, Kerri looked for positive ways of confronting it.

The walk was one way of doing that. In 1999, Kerri

raised over \$7,000 and walked all 8.4 miles.

Last year, the MS walk took place in 96 degree heat and humidity, the worst conditions for people with MS. So Kerri didn't walk it.

Still, she raised over \$6,000 on her own.

Another example of Kerri's full-out way of doing things is that Kerri, who recently moved to Langhorne with her husband John, because the one-story home they chose is negotiable by the worst-case-scenario-wheelchair, still returns to Fishtown weekly, continuing her commitment of taking an older neighbor grocery shopping.

"[The older woman] cried when I left," said Kerri. "I told her not to worry, I'd be back.

"So I come back once a week and do her shopping."

## Noah's Ark

**Choose one:** If you've got a life threatening disease, A) Don't start any new projects, or B) If a project speaks to you, take it to heart.

Kerri was watching Oprah one afternoon, when representatives from the non-profit Heifer Project came on and talked about their new ark program.

Money donated to this project buys animals to sustain poor families all over the world: chickens to eat, cows to milk, etc. (For more information, check out their website at [www.heifer.org](http://www.heifer.org).

"I leapt out of bed," Kerri said, with her wide-eyed enthusiasm, who made a connection between this program and her profession.

Thus was born Kerri's latest project: Noah's Ark.

### **A dream for pet sitters**

"Then I had it!," exulted Kerri. "A modern ark, built by professional pet sitters! Could anything be better?!"

"Noah is my hero," Kerri confided.

"Noah," concluded Kerri, with satisfaction, "is the ultimate pet sitter."

So huddling with her colleagues, Kerri's current goal is raising enough money (\$5,000) for an entire ark to set sail.

### **Dedication**

**Choose one:** If you have a life threatening disease, do you A) reflect on the good you've already done, or B) see what good you can do now.

Guess which one Kerri picks.

Stunned by the Heifer Project's goals, Kerri thought to herself, "What have I done that made a difference?"

"Not really enough," she concluded.

So Kerri brought her rare brand of relentless dedication to the Noah's Ark project.

"Look," she enthused, showing a visitor the chart. "Get it?!!"

The more money people donate, the more difference they can make.

"Then the waters begin to go down!... with the people's help! It's so great!"

(Just imagine five exclamation points after each of Kerri's statements.)

"You buy a pair of guinea pigs, you know, save them, and the ship can set sail."

### **Dreams or reality**

Carrying extra bags of groceries for a former

neighbor. Beginning a new project to help others. All the while with a disease that most people would consider a form of bondage.

Is all this realistic?

It's not like Kerri avoids reality.

"This is a monster of a disease," Kerri states flatly. "It's changed my life."

Kerri has cut down her pet sitting hours to six to eight hours per day. Her income, naturally, is cut in half. And she can run down the inventory of how MS has thus far invaded her body.

It's not like Kerri's out of touch with her feelings.

Kerri admitted getting depressed this past year.

"I think it's hit me in some final way," she said, the exuberance missing for the moment.

But after giving expression to some sadness, Kerri recovered and quickly moved on. To something positive.

"I'm taking strength training classes through the MS foundation," she said. "They're awesome."