



Experienced handler Doug Paterson with his pal Cogburn. Photos: Caleb Dixon-Galbreath, KP News

Chicken Whisperer

A desire for fresh eggs ignited a passion for raising chickens.

CALEB DIXON-GALBREATH, KP NEWS

Pets hold a significant place in many homes and are often treated as equal members of the family. From pampered pups and spoiled kittens to horses held in the highest regard, people simply love their pets. And while it's not uncommon to raise a few chickens in the back yard, few of these feathered friends are elevated to the level found in the home of Doug and Dorene Paterson.

The Patersons have lived on the Key Peninsula for a little over 20 years. Doug is a chaplain with Key Peninsula Fire Department and a tugboat captain. Many years ago, Dorene managed a quail farm; chickens were a recent addition to their home here.

"Our chicken story starts like most people's," Doug said. "We thought: Wouldn't it be nice to have some of our own fresh eggs?"

Dorene ordered an incubator and several Serama chicken eggs, a breed native to Malaysia, as a surprise Christmas gift to Doug. Seramas are the smallest breed of chickens in the world with an average weight

of one pound. Their eggs are roughly the size of a nine-volt battery.

Dorene did the math and put the eggs in the incubator so that they would hatch on, or at least near, Christmas day.

"On Christmas Eve, the eggs started to crack so I asked Doug if he wanted to come open his present early," Dorene said.

"I told her I didn't mind waiting until the morning," he said.

"So I said, no I think you better come now," Dorene said.

Doug watched and cheered on the chicks as they hatched one by one. He continued to talk to them and all six of the chicks imprinted on him.

Doug's fondness for his chicks only grew. He fed them from his hands and

they would huddle together on his lap to take naps. They followed him throughout the house and on their walks around the yard.

"They're very social creatures, actually," he said. "You have to take the time to watch them but they all have unique personali-



ties. They have favorite foods, or spots on the couch, they get excited to see you, and sometimes they're grumpy."

On their walks around the yard, he showed them where to find the best worms. As they grew, Doug would make cooing noises to encourage them to crow.

"You feel bad when you see them fail," he said. "Maybe it's silly, but they're like your kids. You want to see them succeed."

Dorene often practices playing the banjo on their back porch. Sometimes the

chickens will come and sit at her feet while she plays.

"One of the chickens, Diz,

would walk around under my legs while I played," Dorene said. "I swear it looked as if she was dancing."

One day one of the chickens, Cogburn, followed Doug to his car as he was heading out on an errand. So, Doug picked him up and took Cogburn with him.

"He loved it! Sat on my lap the whole time," he said. "They love going places with me and people get a real kick out seeing the chickens around town."

This became a regular practice and Doug is often seen around town with one of his chickens. Doug is on the leadership board at the Lakebay Community Church, where he is often accompanied by Cogburn.

"There was a woman who was new to the area and deciding on a church to regularly attend and she came to one of these meetings," Doug said. "When she saw Cogburn she told me, 'Any church with a chicken, is the church for me.'"

Last summer, Doug's uncle came up from California for a family reunion on Anderson Island. The trip to is more than two hours from the Paterson residence, including a bridge toll and ferry ride. Doug and Dorene figured it was a good excuse to kayak instead.

As full-fledged members of the family, Doug didn't want to leave the chickens out of the reunion entirely. And so Dorene,

Doug, and their intrepid chicken, Surprise, set out for Anderson Island.

"He sat on my lap for the whole ride," Doug said. "He was the absolute star of the party. The whole family loved him."

"Surprise didn't seem to mind being on the kayak, except for the occasional spray from big waves," Doug said. "But he did seem glad to be back on land when we got back."

Sadly, chicken lives do not tend to be very long and the only chicken remaining from that first brood is Cogburn. Some passed away in their sleep, another wandered off and was never seen again. Surprise was taken by an eagle.

"People might think, oh they're just chickens, and sure, they are," Doug said. "But when you raise them, get to know them, see their little personalities; it's sad when they're gone."

The Patersons have raised more chickens but Doug said his heart is more guarded. The chickens live outside now in a roost he built. They have even rescued a few chickens from neglectful owners and abandoned farms. One mysteriously wound up on their neighbor's doorstep and they promised to give it a good home.

Doug and Cogburn can still be seen driving around town and going on errands. And every Friday night, Cogburn can be found on Doug's lap, cozied up as they watch a movie together.

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