



# LEGACY SOCIETY NEWS

## Richard Avanzino ON LEADERSHIP AND PASSING THE TORCH

The Board of Directors meeting at the San Francisco SPCA in the spring of 1980 should have been tense. Richard Avanzino, the SF SPCA President at the time, faced the possibility of jail time for refusing to comply with a court order regarding an 11-year-old dog named Sido.

Instead, the Board presented Richard with a cake containing a file, just in case he needed to make an escape. That cake symbolized something essential about leadership at the SF SPCA: the willingness to make decisions that feel impossible but are right for animals.

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**“My wife was not happy that she had married a jailbird,” Richard recalls with a laugh.**

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Sido’s guardian included a clause in her will requesting that her dog be humanely euthanized. This decision was not out of cruelty, but out of concern that no one else would care for Sido after her passing. Upon learning Sido’s fate, Richard and the SF SPCA intervened—sparking a legal battle that would eventually lead to landmark legislation and the creation of the Sido Pet Protection Program. This safety net continues to serve animals and their guardians today.

### Arriving at a crossroads

When Richard first joined the SF SPCA as President in 1976, the organization was facing serious



*Richard Avanzino pictured with Sido, the inspiration behind the Sido Pet Protection Program.*

financial difficulties and was at a crossroads in its identity. The SF SPCA had a pioneering history, but it was struggling to define its future.

“It was a very exciting era,” he says. “We liked the legacy we had inherited, and we wanted to see if we could contribute to that.”

Over the next four decades, Richard would help reshape companion animal welfare—first during his 20 years at the helm of

the San Francisco SPCA, and later as President of Maddie’s Fund—navigating moments that called for bold action and thoughtful stewardship.

“Every day was a challenge, a learning experience,” he says. “All of the decisions we made were guided by one thing. What is the right thing to do for animals that need to be protected?”

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# Message from the Director of Planned Giving



**June Hom**  
Director of Planned Giving

Legacy is often described as something we leave behind, but at the San Francisco SPCA, it is something that lives on every single day.

In this issue of Legacy Society News, you'll read about Richard Avanzino, whose leadership helped shape the SF SPCA and the broader animal welfare movement. Richard understood that caring for animals requires courage, forethought, and an unwavering commitment to doing what is right for animals, even when the path forward is not easy. His legacy is reflected in programs that protect animals during life's transitions and in bold decisions that expand access to care.

As a Legacy Society member himself, Richard embodies something deeply meaningful about this community. Those who choose to include the SF SPCA in their estate plans share a common set of values: a profound love for animals, a belief in thoughtful stewardship, and a desire to ensure that future generations inherit a kinder, more humane world. Legacy Society members are planners, caregivers, and visionaries. You understand that lasting change is built over time, through intention and trust.

Your commitment ensures that animals and the people who love them will continue to find support, safety, and hope, today and for many years to come.

**Thank you.** 🐾

## Wills vs. Trusts: Know the Difference?

	WILL	TRUST
<b>PROBATE AND PRIVACY</b>	Subject to probate; your will becomes public record in these proceedings	Provides faster, more private distribution of assets by bypassing probate; all details remain confidential
<b>ASSET MANAGEMENT AND DISTRIBUTION</b>	Specifies how assets are distributed after your lifetime	Outlines asset management and distribution during and after your lifetime
<b>CONTROL OVER DISTRIBUTION</b>	Limits control over timing and method of distribution	Allows for greater control over timing, method, and conditions of distributions
<b>EXECUTOR/TRUSTEE</b>	Requires appointment of executor or personal representative to administer will	Requires appointment of trustee to manage trust assets
<b>INCAPACITY PLANNING</b>	No instructions for managing assets in the event of incapacity	Trustee will manage your assets if you are unable to handle your financial affairs
<b>COSTS</b>	Generally lower initial cost compared with trusts	Likely to have higher initial cost but can offer potential savings by avoiding probate

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**Want to learn more? Contact June Hom to receive an invitation to our next estate planning seminar.**

## The courage to diverge

Some of the most consequential decisions of Richard's career involved changing course, even when it meant challenging the status quo.

At the time, the SF SPCA held the city's animal control contract, which was a significant source of revenue. But over time, priorities changed. The SF SPCA focused on comprehensive animal care, while the city needed to balance budget constraints.

"We were on diverging paths," Richard says.

Rather than compromise on care standards, Richard made the difficult choice to end the contract and help the city start its own program. "It was sort of gutsy," Richard admits. However, some outstanding SF SPCA staff members moved to the city's program to help support its growth, and the two organizations continued to work closely to support San Francisco's animals. "I think it was a good decision for the animals, because we ended up with two agencies aligned to help animals in need, with different, but complementary, roles," he says.

This trend of innovating for the sake of animals continued throughout Richard's tenure. For example, the SF SPCA invested heavily in spay/neuter services before they were widely accepted as a humane way to reduce shelter populations. It also continually updated its equipment and practices to better serve animals and launched a robust volunteer program to engage the local community.

"Whatever we did, we did it because we thought it was in the animal's best interest," Richard says. "And over time, we were making a difference."

## The daily practice of long-term thinking

Looking back, Richard is quick to dismiss the idea of a single turning point. Instead, lasting change came from a daily commitment to making the right decisions for animals who needed our help.

This approach required a true team effort. Staff, volunteers, and board members aligned around shared goals. Perhaps most remarkably, Richard helped bring together a diverse San Francisco community—people with differing economic, educational, and political backgrounds—around their shared love of animals.

"Those dozens of decisions ended up creating a path," Richard says. "And that path led to a wonderful outcome."

The Sido Pet Protection Program is one example. What began as a single legal case became a lasting commitment to ensure that animals never experience a gap in care during major life transitions. It is a reminder that long-term impact often begins with one courageous decision.

## Passing the torch

Today, Richard looks at the SF SPCA with both pride and gratitude.

"I feel so blessed that Dr. Jennifer Scarlett and all the other people there are taking it to the next level," he says.

"They're doing things that weren't even imagined back in the day."

He sees the SF SPCA's willingness to be brave and innovative as a continuation of its tradition. It is about preparing the organization to surpass what came before.

"The torch moves forward," he says. "It carries on, and it provides a better life for what's to come, for the future."



*Dr. Jennifer Scarlett with Richard Avanzino and his dog, Carly, in front of portrait of Sido.*

## Planning for the future with the Legacy Society

As a Legacy Society member himself, Richard has made the same kind of forward-looking commitment he encouraged throughout his career. For him, making that kind of commitment comes down to trust: a strong track record of leadership, a proven ability to follow through on promises, and the discipline to make bold decisions while managing resources responsibly over the long term.

"The fact that you're willing to challenge the norms, that you're willing to take on the tough task, the fact that you're going up against significant obstacles to try to make for a better world—that provides, for me, the confidence that the SF SPCA is and forever will be a great leader for the animal welfare movement," Richard explains.

"To be able to invest in that as part of my legacy is something that I am thrilled to be a part of," he adds. "I believe in the leadership, I believe in the organization, I believe in the system, and I believe in the good works that have been done and will be done."

## Looking forward

In reflecting on decades of experience in animal welfare, Richard remains optimistic. "The world ahead for animals looks very bright," he says. "It looks to be very exciting."

His legacy isn't about one person or one moment. It's about ensuring the work continues—through the courage to make tough decisions, the vision to plan for tomorrow, and the humility to pass the torch to those who will carry it even further.

"I'm just thrilled that the San Francisco SPCA is there and going to be there and will always be at the forefront of this." 🐾



201 Alabama Street  
San Francisco, CA 94103-4217  
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### Enrolled cats and dogs receive:

- Medical and behavioral intake examination and treatment
- Adoption services to rehome your pet
- Foster placement, if necessary
- A lifetime of **FREE** medical, dental, and behavioral care in our hospital after adoption

**To learn more**, visit [sfspca.org/sido](https://sfspca.org/sido), call (415) 522-3510, or email [sido@sfspca.org](mailto:sido@sfspca.org).

