

## Sky

Mary Black Heath System of Spartanburg, SC sits on a campus that includes the hospital and several other affiliated buildings, including doctors' offices and a large conference center. The grounds have a nature trail that winds through woods and meadows. There is a fast-flowing creek, crossed at one point by a picturesque wooden footbridge. In front of the buildings, fountains with pools attract birds and wild ducks. It's a beautiful parklike setting.

Last May, someone – we don't know who – considered this safe, tranquil place the perfect location to release his/her pet rabbit. Someone – for whatever reason – decided he/she could no longer keep the large white New Zealand doe we have named Sky. By selecting this haven, it seems the owner cared about the rabbit, wanted her to be safe and have a good life.

However, because Sky is a domestic pet, she could not survive for long even in this beautiful setting. As pets, domestic rabbits do not have to call upon their wild instincts in their protected indoor lives. Often they have lived compatibly with dogs and cats. They therefore don't recognize danger. They are far too trusting; and when abandoned outdoors, become easy prey for dogs, cats, and coyotes.

Domestic rabbits have a hard time getting enough to eat on a wild diet; and soon after release, they begin to starve. They are dependent upon richer and more plentiful food sources. Abandoned rabbits also fall victim to internal and external parasites. In only two to three days their strength and health begin to decline.

The first order of business for a domestic rabbit abandoned out of doors is to find a hiding place. On the Mary Black campus, Sky sought refuge in the thick weeds and brambles along the steep creek bank.

Over the following days, she made periodic sojourns from her hiding place and mapped out the surrounding area. She made note of good grazing areas and numerous hiding places. She decided the bank of the creek, where cover was thickest, would be the most secret and protected spot to begin construction of her tunnel. This would be the beginning of her future warren.

Domestic rabbits are gregarious animals, and Sky believed surely other rabbits would soon appear to help her in the construction of her warren. But as the days went by, no other rabbits appeared. Sky felt very alone and began to wonder how she could do everything by herself.

By the end of the first week, she began to get very hungry. She was losing weight and losing strength. Ticks, fleas, and warbles targeted her. She was beginning to despair.

People and cars were constantly coming and going in and out of the buildings and parking lots. Little did Sky know she was becoming a topic of conversation within the hospital halls and doctors' offices. Word was spreading among the Mary Black nurses and staff members: "Did you see that big white rabbit hopping around the parking lot this morning?" And, "I was walking on the trail at lunch, and a white rabbit ran out of the bushes right in front of me!" Many became concerned: Deb, Gia, and Daphne to name a few. Over the upcoming days they made several attempts to catch Sky. All attempts failed. Sky always foiled everyone by disappearing into her secret, well-hidden tunnel.

One evening after work, Gia returned to the scene with her teenaged son. She was sure he could catch the rabbit – and he did! "He had his hands around that rabbit, but she slipped out of his grip and ran clean away," Gia reported.

On another evening in the pouring rain, Deb went to the creek bank after work to look for Sky. And there she was, grazing by the side of the creek. Deb walked slowly toward Sky, talking softly to her. She walked on the

edge of the creek bank in hopes of preventing Sky from descending down the bank into the thick weeds and disappearing as she had always done before. Deb got too close to the edge of the bank; and in the slippery wet mud, she lost her footing. Suddenly she went sliding down the steep bank, landing in the creek. When she recovered herself, she realized Sky had vanished. Arriving home wet, muddy, and disheveled, Deb was greeted by her husband who inquired, "Rough day?"

By the third week, Sky was noticeably slower. Everyone knew she wasn't doing well and couldn't survive much longer. All concerned were now more determined than ever to catch this elusive white rabbit.

Gia and Deb, both Mary Black practice managers, and Daphne, a nurse, agreed to meet at the creek after work. Deb brought wire-segmented fencing. Their plan was to close in on Sky, surround her with the fence and trap her.

Deb was the first to show up. Before Gia and Daphne arrived, an unknown woman pulled into the parking lot and got out of her car with a bag of carrots. Evidently the carrot delivery was expected because just then Sky appeared. The two women, total strangers, slowly approached Sky, each holding one end of the expanding wire fence. The woman with the carrots tossed one on the ground in front of Sky. So very hungry, Sky went for it. The two women quickly unfolded the fence in a tight circle around Sky. Deb seized the opportunity and grabbed the surprised rabbit. The three-week ordeal was over. Sky was caught at last!

As if on cue, Gia and Daphne arrived with a pet carrier and helped secure Sky. She was wet, muddy, and forlorn. Her eyes appeared dull, sad, and hopeless. Deb took Sky home. She cleaned, dried, and fluffed Sky in warm towels. She gave her hay, salad, pellets, and water. She treated her with love, gentleness, and kindness. Then she bedded her down in the kitchen for the night.

In the morning, just that quickly, Sky's eyes were bright, alert, and hopeful. Clearly she understood: "I've fallen into kind hands. I'm going to be all right."

At the Sanctuary, Sky's health issues were immediately addressed. She began to gain weight and strength. For several months she lived in the Sanctuary health care building. Then along came Babbit. He was the perfect mate for Sky. No bonding period was necessary. They hit it off right from the start!