



Turtle Patrol

An advocate's mission to prevent highway deaths

Stephanie Downs was driving home one morning in June 2009 when a turtle suddenly came ricocheting out from underneath the truck in front of her. In a blink, she was sure she had hit him too.

She turned around. She headed back. And thus began a new journey—one that would ultimately save hundreds of turtles from a similar fate.

First things first, though: Somehow, her turtle was still alive, popping his head out despite a smashed shell. Downs drove him

to an emergency vet, who euthanized him. But the experience sparked questions: What exactly was that turtle—and others she'd seen—doing along that stretch of highway, sandwiched between Lake Whitehurst and a naval base in Norfolk, Va.?

Day after day, she returned to the site. She watched. She began to figure it out: The turtles were climbing out of the lake via a spillway and then swimming into a culvert, under the road, and into a creek on the

naval base side. They were then crawling through holes in the Navy's fence and onto the highway—where, even if they managed to cross two lanes, a concrete median blocked further progress.

They didn't stand a chance—until Downs came along.

"Stephanie is an inspiration to us all," says HSUS wildlife scientist Stephanie Boyles, who along with her colleague, the late Susan Hagood, offered input throughout the long months of "Operation Turtle."

"This problem, I think, has existed in that causeway for years. And it took one person to say, 'I'm going to make a difference.' And she just never gave up."

Downs' first step: getting the Navy's approval to patch the fence and add foot-high silt material to block the turtles' view. Then last spring, she finally persuaded city officials to install a concrete ramp for turtles to climb up the spillway and back into the lake.

"What I learned, I think, was just: Refusing to take 'no' for an answer can get you far," Downs says. "... You know, just having a Plan B, a Plan C, a Plan D. Just keeping on it."

And clearly, Operation Turtle is working: Casualties have dropped from perhaps 150 each summer to about 20 in the last two years.

"If the world was full of people like Stephanie," Boyles says, "it would be a much better place for the animals."

— *Michael Sharp*



Stephanie Downs Norfolk, Va.

► **THE DRIVING FORCE:** Downs has always been driven to relieve suffering. She laughs as she recounts a story her mom once told: "I remember when you came home from Sunday school, when you were about 4, and you were completely mad at God for letting all the animals drown except two of each kind."

► **CLIMBING ONBOARD:** While awaiting approval to patch the naval base fence, Downs would search the perimeter for turtles to carry back across the road. "I learned the hard way that the military doesn't like it if you start digging under their fence," she says, laughing. But naval personnel eventually warmed to her cause, forming the Turtle Recovery Team to do patrols. And while replacing the fence last summer, Navy officials called Downs to assure her a temporary fence would still keep the turtles safe.

► **FINAL PHASE:** Downs hopes this spring and summer will reveal the success of the spillway modification. She's seen turtles a third of the way up the ramp, and she's been told they might be crossing at night—though verification could be tricky: A turtle walking uphill might not be quite fast enough to set off a motion-sensor camera.