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Mackenzie, aka Mackie the Miracle Umbrella Cockatoo

By Shauna Roberts

It's evening and I'm in the bird room playing with my flock. It's been a normal night and nothing extraordinary is going on. Casper's popping his head out of his bag and saying "Peek a boo!". Winnie is hopping on the floor with crest and wings out and up looking very silly, while Sunny is looking relaxed as the rest of the flock. Mackie is in his cage, clacking and hanging on the side bars rather than on his perch or bottom of the cage. Something is differentdoes he actually want to come out for ME? I took a deep breath and offered him my arm and to my amazement he eagerly stepped up "Oh my gosh!" I think as he chuckles, does his crazy Mackie rock-n-roll head shakes and then nestles his face into my chest and rubs his head back and forth. I'm holding back tears of joy because I can't recall when I last held Mackie at night. It's been such a long time, a couple of years actually, and here he is relaxed, sitting on my arm, and as I stand by his cage he's not running back in to it and appears to be very content.

The Bad Years

I'm remembering Mackie's story as I preen his head and rub his stiff, battered-looking wings. Mackie is a male Umbrella Cockatoo hatched approximately in 1985. He was purchased as a chick from a breeder by someone who doted on Mackie for years until his special person found a boyfriend. The boyfriend became increasingly jealous of Mackie as time went by and as a result Mackie's life drastically changed. His cage was changed to a bathtub in the basement where he now spent his days, mostly alone. How could he understand the dramatic change in his life, being deprived of attention and interaction from his original caregiver that had been routine for many years? Nearly overnight, his life went from being the center of this person's life to exile in an empty bathtub tucked away from all household interaction. Banished from social activity, Mackie started to scream for contact. It worked, he was given attention for this unwanted and natural behavior in his revised routine. This person didn't realize that yelling words such as "shut up", or worse, to a bird like Mackie deprived of social interaction positively reinforced his noisy behavior. His vocalizations became louder and more persistent for longer and longer periods of time. At some point the frustrated and angry boyfriend decided he'd fix Mackie's screaming. His solution was to use punishment by coming when Mackie called and burn Mackie with lit cigarettes for making the noise – a reasonable solution in this person's opinion, although we all know this type of abusive positive punishment is never an acceptable method. To prevent infection from settling into the wounds, the same couple sprayed Mackie with bleach solution on the burned areas. No one knows how many times Mackie was burned but his chest and body show the old scars. Many wing feather follicles are so damaged that feathers will never grow again while other follicles were so damaged that a few feathers sometimes grow in extremely brittle and in the wrong direction occasionally causing Mackie to mutilate himself. Oh, what he went through. Burned with cigarettes, sprayed with a severe skin irritant, some spinal trauma from either trying to escape the bathtub, falling or possible physical abuse.

Mackie finally was transferred out of that situation by his original caregiver who took him back to the breeder in order to save his life. His breeder was going to have him euthanized but just in case there

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was another option, she contacted The Gabriel Foundation and spoke directly with Julie Murad who was long familiar with this particular breeder. Mackie was in such bad shape by then, featherless, burnt and wings drooping close to his side no one knew if he would have use of his wings; how his skin would heal and what future lay in store for him. Julie picked up Mackie immediately. He was treated by the Foundation's former veterinarian and subsequently by current Medical Director, Jerry LaBonde, M.S., DVM. Months of bandages and treatments were required to rid his skin of a persistent pseudomonas infection. Mackie was amazing during the treatments, and allowed the vets and Julie to tend to his wounds once or twice daily. Sometimes Julie would hear Mackie vocalizing what she described as sounding like a heated argument between two people. Other times Mackie would sit on his perch, moaning in what appeared to be a self-soothing type of voice as he became less animated would eventually sit still and may even appear to fall to sleep. From this series of sounds also came the best 'dinosaur' imitation that we have ever seen, and Mackie readily responds to the request to be a dinosaur when asked and has always received smiles, clapping and praise for doing so and even an occasional pistachio nut. All of which are positive reinforcers for Mackie.

In order to receive the close supervision and treatment critical for his survival, Mackie lived in Julie's home for nearly 4 years, slowly improving both physically and socially as he started interacting with a larger circle of people. After years of bandages and loving care from TGF, vets and his fan club, Julie made the decision that Mackie was actually ready for a real home.

Hope Springs Eternal

I remember the first time I met Mackie. It was October 2002 and I came to The Gabriel Foundation to attend Susan Friedman's first ever live LLP workshop with my friend Gloria Ridgway and to meet Mackie. I'd known Mackie for 3 yrs as his sponsor and through stories about him that Julie would share with me. I felt like I'd known him for years. I was thrilled to be there for Susan's workshop but was given permission by the teacher herself to play a bit of hooky as long as my time was spent with Mackie.

There he was in his cage with eyes that looked like dark sparkling pools of water and he said "Hello" to me in that special Mackie voice. I said hello back and opened the cage door to hand him a present I had brought to him. It was a fake egg that he took and tossed in the air and chuckled. I had given Julie an egg for him a few months prior and was told he adored it as he would spend literally hours pushing it around the cage grate, lifting it into the play box, and tossing it around. Mackie went down to his play box where he showed me how to play toss the egg, Shauna pick it up for him. It was a fun way to introduce myself to Mackie empowering him to interact with me. Later Mackie came out to socialize and went to most anyone who asked. I found him to be amazing and one of the greatest teachers in my life. After all that he'd been through, **he was** going from person to person and being just as charming as he could be with one BIG exception, no men. Mackie was fearful of men but who could blame him! If any male even approached him from a distance, he would bend as far away from the approaching man, even to the point of hurling himself away. His behavior looked like panic to me.

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Even with this visible fear of men, Allen my husband, understood the importance of our commitment to this bird, and Mackie came home on a flight with Allen and me to join our flock of Umbrella Cockatoos. Once home I took Mackie out of the carrier and we walked into the bird room. His crest went up as Mackie bowed his head and said “hello!” to each and every cockatoo in the room and each one returned “hello” to him – in English! I have not seen an easier adjustment by all the flock than when Mackie joined us. Mackie and I had great fun together but Allen was left out due Mackie's uneasiness with men. Allen didn't mind and to his credit and patience, he would chat with Mackie from a comfortable distance and always dropped pistachio nuts in his food bowl each night. This later proved to be an effective way to increase his value to Mackie.

New Challenges

One day during the summer of 2004, I walked into the bird room to find a ring from a toy lodged tightly around Mackie's lower mandible. It didn't appear to be hurting him but removing it would be a two-person project. Just as my son and I were preparing to pry the ring off by using two pair of pliers, Allen walked in. He was more comfortable around birds than our son was so he took on the task of taking the ring off of Mackie's beak while I restrained. It was an easy enough task though delicate and it was over in a matter of a few seconds. As soon as the ring was removed Mackie's eyes seemed to sparkle and he leaned towards Allen then hopped onto his arm. We looked at each other with surprise and delight. Allen jokingly commented that the 13 pounds of pistachio nuts had paid off. Mackie had accepted Allen but I quickly found Mackie's behavior with me had changed as well. Although I could still hold Mackie if Allen wasn't around, Mackie wanted nothing to do with me if precious Allen was anywhere near. Within a few days I had to be careful when Allen was around otherwise I would be bitten by Mackie. Oh yes, I recall that's when Mackie started to call himself “Chicky Boy”. “I'm Chicky Boy” sounded cute and made me laugh at first but then became a warning that mischief in the form of biting or chasing would ensue.

After all that Mackie had been through in his life it wasn't all that surprising that he might focus so much on one person specifically – it's what he had been inadvertently “trained” to do for years. What an accomplishment for Mackie to have a trusting and active relationship with man.

A few weeks later we took our flock on a road trip Colorado to The Gabriel Foundation. Upon arrival, I took Mackie outside and he could hear The Gabriel Foundation's parrots squawking. Mackie's crest went up and he started to chatter then suddenly jumped from my arm to the ground. I turned to see Allen about 50 feet away and wondered what to do? Do I run to avoid being bitten by Mackie (positively reinforcing a great chasing game) or do I pick him up and most likely get bitten, possibly reinforcing biting? Neither one seemed like the best alternative, but I ran anyway! Allen walked over to retrieve Mackie and I scolded myself for not thinking ahead about possible scenarios which resulted in me being unprepared for this situation. After that, I have never forgotten to make certain that Mackie was set up for success so I always carried a bath towel with me if there was a possibility that Allen might appear. Mackie is very used to and comfortable with towels - he clicks and clatters when wrapped up in one. Having a towel was a way to keep me protected from being bitten just in

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case an unexpected situation arose again. Over the years my first priority was to learn to interact with Mackie in ways that didn't require a towel even if that meant spending time with Mackie when Allen wasn't around. When Allen was with us, I kept my distance as not to reinforce undesired behavior.

It was now my turn to become the pistachio person, dropping them into Mackie's cup during the day but Allen was still giving him pistachios as well so that didn't do as much to help improve my relationship with Mackie. I needed more in the form of positive reinforcement so when Mackie stepped up for me in the morning I would gently wrap him in a towel and carry him through the house to find his favorite person, Allen, and then pass him on to Allen and leave. At times I would ask Mackie if he wanted to go find Allen; he'd shake his head up and down, step up and off we'd go searching for his best friend.

Several things began to change: Mackie was now lunging at the cage bars whenever I went near his cage if Allen was within his sight. I ignored any lunging in order to ensure I didn't give the lunging behavior any unintended function and chuckled covertly when I discovered that if I was looking at Mackie he would freeze still, not moving a muscle, but if I turned my back he would move swiftly and "wham!" against the cage bars. Another preemptive antecedent tool was to keep my eyes on Mackie while I went behind his cage to close binds since this kept him still without lunging.

After many months of ignoring the lunging behavior, Mackie stopped. He then started running back and forth on his perch when Allen was in sight while I was in the same room. I ignored it although I was very aware. If Mackie stopped this behavior, I would use that window to add positive reinforcement praise him and slowly walk over to him. Eventually I was able to gently rub his feet while he clung onto the cage bars where he would hang as though he was frozen to them not moving a muscle, except his eyes. We were making progress with systematic desensitization. Sometimes he grabbed the cage bar with his beak and made kissy sounds and would said "I love you". I reminded myself to not to fall into that trap! I never tested it but my hypothesis was that he was luring me with possible intentions of biting since I'd seen him do this behavior before when he was living at The Gabriel Foundation when he would call to one of his caregivers "Rosa? I love you" and if she came near do his best to grab and bite. I didn't want to give Mackie the least opportunity to practice his biting and get better at it.

Great Gains

Recently the pacing on his perch has lessened and slowed down. Some days it has even been non-existent while Allen was present. If Mackie locked his beak on the cage I would slowly approach and gently touch his beak, then rub his feet and legs a little. By touching him this way I felt protected in the event that Mackie might try to bite because I would have time to quickly move my hand! Again, this is success for Mackie because he was not being given the opportunity to bite which was what I've been working on since his sudden change of behavior towards Allen and me. With Mackie, for me this meant it was important to be very aware of antecedent arrangements to the environment because most of the time he fails to give any warning prior to bites. In my experience working with Umbrella Cockatoos, this is unusual since most cockatoos do give warning, sometimes subtle, even though people miss these warnings. With Mackie's history of previous abuse it makes sense to me that warnings by Mackie are either extremely subtle or non-existent.

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A big step for Mackie and me was when I began offering Mackie nuts in through the cage bars while Allen was in the room. To avoid any bites I had Mackie reach as far as he could through the cage bars for the nut. This worked successfully for both of us.

The last few mornings have been improving too. It wasn't uncommon for Mackie to be slow to step up and he has set a routine that he taught me well (who's the trainer here?). He would say "good boy" and I'd repeat that back to him which felt to me like I was promising him that I *was the* good boy. We might do that behavior a few times while I hold my arm steady for him to step up on to it. It can take him 15-30 seconds to make a decision and some days he chooses not to come out which is fine with me. During the past few weeks he has been stepping up quickly with no "good boy" dialogue. Another change I have noticed is that he appears excited to see me when he and Allen return from their daily walk outside to get the mail – before it seemed as if he'd pretty much ignored me. He was even doing his dinosaur imitation for me upon request, raising his crest up high, swaying back and forth and while growling. What a sight this character becomes!

Home At Last

I feel like I've gotten my Mackie-boy back! He's been coming out for me now both morning and night while also doing great with Allen who still remains his first choice and may always be. I view this as a huge accomplishment for Mackie. Rather than selecting only one person, he's learned that he can interact with two people at the same time even with his strong bond to Allen. I believe that Mackie will continue always be a work in progress that requires patience, responding to him by respecting his decisions, while I carefully pay attention to his body language and think about arranging the environment to be set up in ways that that help him continue to blossom. By using and being consistent with positive reinforcement and systemic desensitization Mackie came a long way once again in his life.

I learned from Susan Friedman that "Mackie" is the nickname for *Dimakatso* in the African dialect Sestho (*say-too*) which means "Miracle". This name perfectly fits this one-pound-plus complicated bundle of feathers and energy that has been through so much during his life, and with time and patience has learned and accomplished so much to enrich his life while becoming my teacher extraordinaire. As long as I continue to practice the learning skills that are a critical part of ABA we both fully benefit from our entwined lives. For me, living with Mackie has truly been a lesson in learning, living with and loving parrots.

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