



Top dog

Bill Berloni's gift has created a job that never existed before him

BILL BERLONI TAUGHT SUNNY HOW

to get used to the sound of applause and the bright lights of fame. He also taught the female dog, who would play a male role, how to sit, stay and heel.

Berloni, 56, has trained animals such as Sunny, a sandy-haired, mixed-breed dog, for stage, television and commercials for 36 years. He owns William Berloni Theatrical Animals in Connecticut, and his A-list training status has won him attention across the country. In 2011, Berloni won a Tony Honor for Excellence in the Theatre.

Berloni's pedigree caught the eye of Quin Gresham, artistic director of Arrow Rock Lyceum Theatre in Arrow Rock. Gresham wanted a real dog to play Toto for the theater's upcoming production of *The Wizard of Oz*. He wrote Berloni's company an email and was pleased when the trainer himself responded. Berloni considers *The Wizard of Oz* one

of his favorite productions and wasn't concerned with its size. He doesn't care if it's Broadway or a Missouri town with a population of 56.

"I consider myself an artist," Berloni says. "True artists don't do their craft to get famous."

In 2006, Berloni was filming *Charlie Wilson's War* with Tom Hanks and Julia Roberts in Los Angeles. At the same time, longtime friend Mark Mazzarella, Mazzarella Media producer and director, was working on a high school production of *The Miracle Worker* in Connecticut. Berloni flew between the two coasts to become a part of both productions.

"With all his success that he has on Broadway working with great talents and so many great shows, his head should be larger than a Macy's Day balloon," Mazzarella says. "But it's not — he's just Bill Berloni."

In the summer of 1976, Berloni was a 19-year-old apprentice at Goodspeed Opera House in Connecticut. He dreamed of becoming an actor, and the opportunity for a part in a play arose, granted that he could complete a difficult task.

His challenge was to find and train the dog who would play Annie's canine friend, Sandy, in the original production of *Annie*. For \$7, Berloni purchased a mixed-breed terrier who was a day away from euthanization. The terrier-mix, whom he aptly named after the character it would play, held the role for seven years.

Six months after Berloni rescued Sandy, director and producer Mike Nichols (*Closer*) asked him to train the dog again for the Broadway production of *Annie*. He became an acclaimed trainer overnight.

"I realized I was much more talented as an animal trainer than an actor, and I enjoyed it more," Berloni says.

He extended his love for animals beyond the theater. Berloni is the director of animal behavior and training at the Humane Society of New York. Executive Director Sandra DeFeo says the position was created in 1996 because of his dedication and love for animals.

He turned his passion into a book, *Broadway Tails: Heartfelt Stories of Rescued Dogs Who Became Showbiz Superstars*, which was published in 2008. Each chapter focuses on a different rescue story Berloni helped create. He describes the memoir as an education wrapped up in funny stories.

Berloni isn't finished with the dogs after the last curtain call. He brings every animal he works with to his Connecticut home, where he lives with his wife and daughter, or finds another suitable owner. In his home, there are 22 rescue dogs, five of which are displaying their talent across the country, and other animals, including four rescued horses.

+ ANNA SEAMAN



(Top Left) A young Bill Berloni practices a trick with the original Sandy for a scene in *Annie*. He began working with rescues 36 years ago. (Above) Every dog trained by Berloni is given a permanent place to live in his Connecticut home or is placed with a suitable owner. In 2008, Berloni wrote a memoir recounting the rescue stories of the dogs.