The great rabbit pardon of 2016

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By Lisa Wangsness Globe Staff, September 17, 2016, 6:23 p.m.

LINCOLN — Down a wooded cul-de-sac, the ranch house crouches behind large rhododendrons, unremarkable but for the strings of Tibetan prayer flags fluttering among the pines.

In the basement, 14 rabbits in cages and fenced-off nooks nibble on hay and lettuce, listening to the throaty chanting of Buddhist monks on an endless loop.

These rabbits, along with about 120 others, were once destined for slaughter. But they were saved by a Buddhist yoga teacher who raised the kingly sum of $20,000 to spare them from a fate involving tarragon braising sauce.

"It's been a great privilege for me to do this," Wendy Cook said. "I have huge respect for these animals."

To buy the rabbits, Cook raised money from other Buddhists who support animal liberation, or "life release," a practice that involves saving animals destined to be killed. The practice is said to generate good karma.

It has not, however, been a summer of quiet contemplation for Cook, whose acquisition of the rabbits kicked up a fuss involving Lincoln officials, rabbit lovers, neighbors, and those in charge of Codman Community Farms, the town's nonprofit farm, which sold the rabbits to Cook.

The farm is a 150-acre spread of antique barns and sun-splattered fields in the center of Lincoln. Late last year, its board brought in new farmers, Pete Lowy and Jennifer

Hashley of Pete and Jen's Backyard Birds.

The couple — Peace Corps veterans with a young son — had built a successful business in Concord raising free-range, organically fed animals for high-end restaurants and loyal clientele. They brought with them a herd of meat rabbits, which they had mostly been selling to foodies and European transplants. The farm also raises grass-fed cows, pastured pigs, organic chickens, and other animals, and sells meat and eggs to support its mission.

In May, Cook was tending her community garden plot at the farm when a fellow gardener pointed out the new mobile rabbit "chalet," as Lowy and Hashley called the open-sided shack on a trailer that housed the furry creatures. She was distressed about the rabbits' quality of life.



Wendy Cook with Kunsang, also known as Papa Bear, one of the rabbits she bought for a total of $20,000. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Cook, an omnivore, eventually went over to the chalet to see for herself. She began snapping photos with her iPhone showing droppings accumulating beneath double-stacked wire cages, some only about a foot high, and fur stuck to wooden frames.

"Wow," she recalled thinking to herself. "This is awful."

Others were concerned about the bunnies, too. A small group (of which Cook was not a part) shouted "Rabbit killers!" at the farm's float during the Fourth of July parade.

Beth Taylor, president of the farm board and a Lincoln resident for 31 years, said there have always been opponents of raising animals for slaughter on the town farm, but "we have never had anything like this. Never."

In July, someone called the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. The responding officer found no violations, said Richard LeBlond, chief of law enforcement for the MSPCA.

Lowy said the rabbits' living conditions were in keeping with their philosophy of raising animals humanely.

"We want them to live the best life they can while they're with us," Lowy said. "If we're going to slaughter them, we slaughter them quick. If we're going to keep them for a long time, we keep them in as great an environment as we can."

Lowy was rebuilding some movable field pens, but rabbits need shade, and the chalet was "no different than a rabbit hutch people have in their backyard."

The farm board arranged a meeting between Cook and Lowy. The farmer surprised Cook with a question: Would she like to buy the rabbits?

They were not a big money-maker, Lowy said later, and he wanted to focus on other priorities.

"How much?" Cook said.

"$20,000."

The number, Lowy explained later, included their investments over time in the rabbits' breeding and care.

To the board's astonishment, Cook, in what she described as "a sheer moment of confidence and faith," said yes.

The money turned out to be the easy part. Cook contacted a monk friend in Singapore who claims to have saved the lives of some 250 million animals — including many shellfish — with money he has collected from Buddhist donors.

"The basic idea is to gain merit by saving and protecting lives," said David Eckel, a scholar of Buddhism at Boston University. "If you do good things, good things will happen to you, you are building up spiritual credit . . . in this life and in the next."

Cook says she bought the rabbits as a religious act of mercy. JESSICA RINALDI

Within 24 hours, the Singaporean monk e-mailed to ask where to send the money.

"I mean, I was falling off the couch," Cook said. "This is the universe saying this is the right thing."

But the farm board, which had underscored that the sale of the rabbits in no way reflected ill treatment of the animals, was displeased when Cook started a Facebook page and CrowdRise fund to help support what Cook called "The Great Rabbit Liberation of 2016."

"I was fit to be tied," Taylor said. "It was outrageous to call it a liberation of rabbits, as if they were in some terrible situation."

Cook considered temporarily keeping the rabbits at her home. An alarmed neighbor complained to Town Hall. So Lowy, at the request of the town administrator, let Cook keep the rabbits on a corner of the farm until she could relocate them.

Tibetan monks in cranberry and ochre robes arrived to bless the rabbits, chanting prayers and ringing bells.

Rabbit aficionados, many affiliated with the nonprofit House Rabbit Network, descended on the farm to move the bunnies into larger cages with clean hay and fresh greens. They assessed their health and tended to ear mites and other issues, according to Cook.

The rabbits were given Tibetan or Sanskrit names, such as Amrita (nectar), Anjali (prayer), and Ahimsa (nonviolence). Their cages were moved in a circle around Buddhist sacred objects.

Adoptive families arrived. Vans ferried others to no-kill shelters from New Jersey to Maine.

On Aug. 11, the last of the rabbits departed, except for those staying with Cook, and a few Lowy wanted to keep for teaching purposes.

The relationship between Cook and the farm soured when Lowy left on a trip to Africa in late August; his wife had a fellowship helping new farmers in Ghana and Nigeria. Cook discovered that one of the remaining rabbits on the farm was ill.

She brought it to an MSPCA clinic, which amputated a cancerous leg and treated sores on its other paws.

The MSPCA has not completed its investigation of the situation, but an officer found no violations on a return visit to the farm last week.

"They raise animals humanely and healthfully," said Taylor, "and they are doing a magnificent job."

That sweaty August day when the last shelter van rumbled off remains a happy memory for Cook. She ripped her shirt off, Brandi Chastain-style, and took a headshot of herself collapsed on the shed floor, smiling radiantly.

"That," she said, gazing at the selfie on her laptop, "is the look of bliss and happiness."

Farmer Pete Lowy closed the rabbit chalet where the rabbits who were purchased by Cook were kept before she bought them. JESSICA RINALDI

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