

2014 CONFERENCE RECAP

By Amy Shojai

Every year after the annual CWA Conference, I've written a recap within a day or two of the event. This year, even if I hadn't been too busy, it would be difficult to put thoughts into order.

Frankly, the conference went off the tracks. There's no kind way to say this—it was not the best conference ever—we knew that going into it, after losing Lorie—but there were some OUTSTANDING moments. [CLICK HERE for Pictures from the 2014 Atlanta Conference! \(thank you BJ Bangs\)](#) Here's my recap.

THURSDAY

The TNT Bag Stuffing just wasn't the same without Nancy Petersen there—we missed her enormously! The contents of the bags this year were some of the best swag ever, thanks to her and the [wonderful sponsor-contributors](#). But our gathering room was downstairs, and because of the way registration was conducted, the bags immediately were ferried upstairs to registration. That's where Barkworld held its opening reception of free munchies and for-fee bar (\$10/wine, wow....\$18 in the regular bar, double wow!). Sadly, very few returned for our usual “kitten get to know you” gathering, and that was disappointing.

Later Thursday evening, several of the past presidents and experienced Council Members gathered with incoming officers/board members to answer questions and offer suggestions going forward. Because of the way the Barkworld/MeowWorld schedules were managed, there was no specific time allocated for a Council of Directors Meeting. Please note, this is not unusual—there have been several CWA Conference events during which either time wasn't available or so few Council Members attended that Council business had to be discussed later via Email so more folks could be involved in the process.

FRIDAY

Friday morning began with a terrific opening Keynote by Megan Casey courtesy of Barkworld, outlining how the “pet niche” actually is huge and ripe for all kinds of pet-centric endeavors. It appeared the opening talk was attended by less than 100, which surprised me. I don't know the final attendance count (BarkWorld has not shared any information with CWA) but I would guess around 300 attended. This of course is a much bigger turnout than our past “solo” events (we had, as usually, about 60 folks register specifically for our events) and I had high hopes for full seminar rooms.

CWA held its annual Membership Meeting shortly after the opening ceremonies, during which elections were held and a few reports were given. [You can read the minutes here.](#)

The hallway meanwhile was filled with some terrific exhibitors and vendors, but I'm informed that the number again was down from previous years. The CWA was given two tables for signing books at the far end of the hall, located directly outside the main ballroom. Many of us

signed and sold a few books—and I spend a lot of time there, rather than in sessions, so I can't report on the sessions as well as I'd like. I was part of the Veterinary & Behavior Panel which was well attended, and we missed Marilyn Krieger and really wished she could have been there!

Always in the past, CWA provided a printed booklet with all the seminars/events scheduled, including sponsor names and what each sponsored. This also included a "thank you" list for all the volunteer coordinators. This also served as a wonderful souvenir and record of that year's Conference events, and also was a way to provide attendees with contact info for thank yous to be sent to sponsors.

This year, BarkWorld preferred to provide the schedule in an on-line phone-ready App and initially declined to offer a printed schedule. For that reason, CWA printed a flier with our individual seminar and event information. Unfortunately, room changes at the last minute made these fliers inaccurate, which I know caused much frustration for both the CWA conference planners and attendees. Barkworld did ultimately print a complete updated schedule, with titles of sessions, for those who requested it. Perhaps due to the confusion, and the location of CWA seminar rooms being hidden behind the registration kiosks and hallway events, very few non-CWA-members attended our CWA seminars. Those who did attend were very complimentary, and often I heard comments after-the-fact from attendees asking, "You mean, that session was here? How did I miss that?"

SATURDAY

Saturday began with the Absent Friends remembrance, organized by Layla Morgan Wilde, and it was one of the highlights of the conference—very moving, and Lorie's brother Tim Huston was there. We shared stories about many absent friends lost far too soon: Lorie Huston, Marion Lane, Sophia Yin, Jim Richards, Mordecai Siegal, and other absent friends and lost pets were all honored. No offense...but I hope we'll never have to do this again in a formal way—I don't want more friends lost like this. It was handled with grace and love, and I know that all who attended appreciated it. At the last minute, Paul Lien on behalf of Pet Healthy Holdings sponsored the event by funding breakfast food. His name may not have gotten onto the sponsors list--again, one of those fall-through-the-cracks things, and Paul does understand (it'd still be nice to thank him!).

The day continued with more great panels and sessions. I gave my DIY Ebook presentation once more, and later sat on a Q & A Author Panel (We did it, So Can You!) that seemed to strike a chord. During the session, some attendees asked questions that were covered earlier in other CWA sessions (ebooks or nonfiction proposals, hiring an editor, etc) and when we mention the other info sessions they seemed surprised and hadn't known about these opportunities.

AWARDS BANQUET MOMENTS...

The Awards Banquet is always memorable for the nominees, winners and the AWESOME sponsors who fund the dinner, reception and prizes. You'll see [the winners' list here](#) but I had to share a couple of never-forget moments for me.

Lorie won the AAFP Cat Friendly award. Amazing. And then she also won the Shojai Mentor Award—she had been nominated by Dusty Rainbolt months before her passing. Boy, was that a hard letter to read during the presentation. Tim Huston accepted the awards on behalf of his sister. Then, Chris Ruben stood up and read an email written to him on the last day Lorie posted to her blog—requesting that he find one of those special Cat Wine bottles to present to Dusty as a thank you for all her help over the year. OMG...if we weren't all puddles on the floor before, that one knocked us all down, especially Dusty. How very much like Lorie to be thinking of other people to thank. During the entire Awards Banquet event, a video remembrance of Lorie from Tim played in a loop, so we got to see photos of her growing up as a kid, with her horses, her cats, and more. [I've uploaded the video here.](#)

The 2014 Atlanta MeowWorld-BarkWorld Conference (CWA's 22nd conference) offered wonderful, paw-some moments (Barkworld opening keynote, CWA seminars, the Absent Friends lovely tribute event, signing opportunities, having dogs and some cats present, the awards banquet night) that were standouts. I don't think I've ever been so moved at a conference. But there also were challenges, to such a degree, that I'm relieved that we will not partner with Barkworld again for the foreseeable future.

FINAL THOUGHTS—3 ½ MONTHS LATER

I'd never attended BarkWorld before, but had heard marvelous reports from CWA members who experienced great things in previous years. Last year when our Committee met via conference calls and email, we were impressed with what BarkWorld had to offer. The principle/owner of BarkWorld even attended last year's CWA event in Dallas and we were all most impressed with her organizational skills, programming, and enthusiasm.

But something happened between last year's meeting and the reality of our partnership event this year, and we truly don't know what. There's been an echoing silence for months, even prior to Lorie's passing. Regular attendees of BarkWorld also shared their puzzlement at the change—and no explanation. The Barkworld website was late posting information, and even now one has to search hard to find any mention of CWA....this after our logo was redesigned in part to better fit with theirs. I will say, the registration booth that boasted both the CWA and Barkworld logos looked terrific!

CWA joined forces with BarkWorld in the hopes we would enrich each other's programs and bring new people to our events—and share in the mutual benefits. Instead, I was disappointed the conference sessions divided into an "us" and "them." In fact, our CWA sessions originally were scheduled to take place on an entirely different floor than the Barkworld events—and we were only moved upstairs to join the conference because attendance/sponsorship proved to be lower than expected. How disappointing for Barkworld and for us! After the conference, I personally reached out to the owner/organizer of Barkworld and to date, have had no response. As far as I'm aware, there has been no further communication from Barkworld to anyone on the past or present CWA Council.

Here's the thing: this year, CWA was not in control. Period. And Barkworld folks maybe also didn't feel in control—sadly there wasn't good communication between the two organizations to get this worked out.

On top of the emotional toll of dealing with Lorie's tragic loss, those who put their own projects and lives on hold to pick up the pieces simply tap danced with flames licking their heels. I didn't do any of the heavy lifting, but heard about a lot of it, mostly giving "atta boys" and "we'll get through this" along the way. Pretty much every ball that got dropped by our amazing-juggling-step-up-to-the-plate pitch hitters had nothing to do with CWA and everything to do with inevitable challenges of an inaugural partnership. I can't speak to what went on behind the Barkworld scenes, but they also must have had unforeseen challenges that rocked their furry boat.

If you've ever attended a CWA conference, you probably noticed how A-type personalities (guilty!) like to script everything, to make sure all sponsors are recognized, volunteers thanked, and programming runs like clockwork. This year, that didn't happen. It COULDN'T happen. Even the parts that were scripted in advance were red-pencilled at the last minute when something beyond CWA's control derailed the plans. When that happens and folks must go off script to put out fires—or just get through the emotion of the moment—things fall through the cracks. This, when the conference was run and planned in advance by two long-time experienced folks, Dusty Rainbolt and Su Ewing, I am frankly amazed that the CWA portions went so very well. Neither one wanted the job but they did it for CWA. For years, Dusty turned down all attempts to arm-twist her into serving as president...and then Lorie Huston made it happen anyway. God bless Lorie.

Kudos to all who worked their furry tails off both offsite and on, for weeks and months in advance and last minute, to make this conference a success. When you put your heart and soul into something you care so deeply about, if it doesn't go exactly as planned, it can't help but sting. Please know that ALL efforts were and are appreciated. Nobody does this for the "glory" – I know that Lorie certainly wasn't in it for the kudos, but rather:

To do good for CWA and the cats that drive us all toward excellence.

We all of us—no single person or group of people, but ALL of us—WE that is CWA did that this year. Despite the challenges and glitches, I know that Lorie would be proud.

Love and embrace each other, support your fellow CWA members, and know that when you hurt, we hurt too. I tell my cat and dog owner consults that one powerful way pets learn is to make mistakes to find out what doesn't work. Why should we humans be any different? We're all still hurting...no reason to point fingers, assign blame OR take credit. Schtuff happens. We'll learn from this and move forward.

Because it's for the cats.

Those who attended, please to send your thoughts/suggestions to your new president, Marci Kladnik who has hit the ground running and already made such great strides. Or post to the Prolist. As your new CWA Conference/Events Chair, I'm collecting suggestions, too.

And please please PLEASE don't neglect to send [thank yous to sponsors and gift bag donors!](#) If this was their first experience with CWA we need to assure them that they are greatly appreciated during this time of transition, and we look forward to working with them in the future.