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Beirutis find comfort in reuniting with pets lost in blast

A tearful young Lebanese woman clutches her cat to her chest-like many Beirutis, she was relieved at being reunited with her pet after the blast that ravaged the capital. Pets have been a source of solace for many of the hundreds of thousands of people affected by the August 4 explosion that ripped through Beirut. The monster



blast at the port shattered glass and sent debris flying, killing over 170 people and injuring at least 6,500 others across the Mediterranean city. In the chaos that ensued, many pets, some of them also hurt, bolted from their homes. Yandi Sfeir, a 38-year-old lawyer, was injured and had to rush to hospital, where she received six stitches in the arm.

When she returned home, her cat Lucky had disappeared. He was found seven days later, three meters (10 feet) underground without food

or water. Volunteers with an animal rights groups, Animals Lebanon, which has led efforts to reunite pets with their owners, helped retrieve Lucky. "I hoped that someone had found him and was taking care of him. But the joy I felt when I saw him... it was like a weight had been lifted," Sfeir told AFP. His presence has brought comfort as she struggles to process the trauma of the disaster, she said. "I still feel the vibrations that preceded the explosions. I'm always worried that something is going to happen." In the days since the blast, Sfeir said she struggled to sleep at home alone, asking her mother or friends to keep her company. Lucky "will help me sleep at home again", she said, adding that the cat too had changed-jumping at the slightest noise.

Lucky was one of over 100 pets reunited with their families, according to Animals Lebanon, thanks to the efforts of charities and hundreds of volunteers. "Animals have this beautiful effect on people, a therapeutic effect, and these people are so happy when they see that their animal is still alive, it's as if they forget that they have lost everything," Maggie Shaarawi, vice-president of Animals Lebanon, told AFP. Dodo the cat, now in the care of Animals Lebanon, "was so traumatized when we found him the first time that he jumped off the balcony again", Shaarawi said. The white-and-ginger cat "still isn't eating, he's very upset", she added.



The catastrophe "brought out everyone's compassion for all living beings and it's something really beautiful, people are united on so many fronts." For the hundreds of thousands of Lebanese whose homes were damaged, many to them left unlivable, pets are a "last link to their home", said Kamal Khatib, a volunteer. The group

has already reunited dozens of owners with their dogs and cats, he said. "It's an amazing feeling to watch them meet again." — AFP



File photo shows a combination of pictures (left) a night view of the Sursock Museum, once a private home built in 1912 and became a host to an impressive permanent art collection as photographed in the neighborhood of Ashrafiyeh in Lebanon's capital Beirut on October 7, 2015; and (right) a handout image obtained from the museum and taken on August 5, 2020, showing its damaged facade with empty windows after their stained glass was broken in the aftermath of the massive blast at the port of Beirut which ravaged entire neighborhoods of the city. — AFP

UNESCO to protect Lebanon as 60 historic buildings 'risk collapse'

The UN's cultural agency UNESCO vowed Thursday to lead efforts to protect vulnerable heritage in Lebanon after last week's gigantic Beirut port blast, warning that 60 historic buildings were at risk of collapse. The effects of the blast were felt all over the Lebanese capital but some of the worst damage was in the Gemmayzeh and Mar-Mikhael neighbourhoods a short distance from the port. Both are home to a large concentration of historic buildings. "The international community has sent a strong signal of support to Lebanon following this tragedy," said Ernesto Ottone, assistant UNESCO Director-General for Culture.

"UNESCO is committed to leading the response in the field of culture, which must form a key part of

wider reconstruction and recovery efforts." Sarkis Khoury, head of antiquities at the ministry of culture in Lebanon, reported at an online meeting this week to coordinate the response that at least 8,000 buildings were affected, said the Paris-based organization. "Among them are some 640 historic buildings, approximately 60 of which are at risk of collapse," UNESCO said in a statement. "He (Khoury) also spoke of the impact of the explosion on major museums, such as the National Museum of Beirut, the Sursock Museum and the Archaeological Museum of the American University of Beirut, as well as cultural spaces, galleries and religious sites."

Even before the explosion, there had been growing concern in Lebanon about the condition of her-

itage in Beirut due to rampant construction and a lack of preservation for historic buildings in the densely-packed city. UNESCO said Khoury "stressed the need for urgent structural consolidation and waterproofing interventions to prevent further damage from approaching autumn rains." The explosion on August 4, which left 171 people dead, has been blamed on a vast stock of ammonium nitrate left in a warehouse at the port for years despite repeated warnings. Lebanon's government under Prime Minister Hassan Diab resigned this week following days of demonstrations demanding accountability for the disaster. — AFP

'Gladiator' star pitches in to rescue blast-hit Beirut eatery

Hollywood star Russell Crowe said Thursday that he donated funds to help rebuild a blast-hit Beirut restaurant on behalf of late food icon Anthony Bourdain, who loved its traditional dishes. The decades-old Le Chef restaurant, located in the heart of a trendy Beirut district, is a beloved neighbourhood place renowned for its home-style cooking. It was blown to pieces by the August 4 explosion that killed 171 people, wounded at least 6,500 and ravaged swathes of Beirut. The Oscar-winning Crowe, best known for his role in the 2000 action film Gladiator, said on Twitter that he made the donation "on behalf of Anthony Bourdain". "I thought that he would have probably done so if he was still around," Crowe said of the celebrity chef and travel journalist who committed suicide in 2018. "Hope things can be put back together soon."



Crowe's \$5,000 donation was made on a GoFundMe page set up by fans of Le Chef, a restaurant popular with tourists as well as locals in the Gemmayzeh neighbourhood that was among the hardest-hit by the explosion. The online fundraiser raised nearly \$11,000 in less than 24 hours, just \$2,000 short of its target. Le Chef is where Bourdain had his first meal when he and his crew were trapped in Lebanon for a week in 2006 because of a month-long war with Israel. It is featured in the highly-praised Lebanon episode of his 'No Reservations' series. "Really good food, very traditional," Bourdain says of the restaurant in the show, calling it a "nice mix" of old and new. It's a "good first meal in Beirut." — AFP

A SON OF A SLAVE REFLECTS ON HIS AMERICAN STORY

At 88, Dan Smith has witnessed some of the defining moments in America's fraught battle for racial equality. He protested in Alabama, marched on Washington with Martin Luther King Jr, and attended the inauguration of the first black president, Barack Obama. He also represents a living link to the nation's dark past: his father Abram was born a slave, 157 years ago. As a boy, his elderly father told chilling stories: about the "hanging tree" where slaves were lynched, and the master who forced a slave to lick a wagon wheel. The man lost part of his tongue when it froze to the steel. Though America has seen much progress, Smith feels that under President Donald Trump, some of it is being lost. "I'm petrified," he tells AFP in an interview at his home in Washington. "Everything we did in the civil rights movement... in terms of voting, and fairness and equality, he's trying to undo it."

Humble beginnings

Smith's father was born in Virginia in 1863, but eventually settled in Connecticut, where he had six children with his second wife Clara and worked as a janitor. Dan, the fifth, came along in 1932. Disaster struck when Abram was struck by a car and killed six years later, leaving Clara to provide for the family. She struggled to make ends meet on her housekeeping wages. Smith chipped in from a young age, working as an assistant to a veterinarian.

He recalls experiencing plenty of discrimination at school. But he was popular and handsome, and found surreptitious ways to date white girls — much to the horror of his mother, who feared the worst if their families found out. "I'd wait for a young lady to call me. She'd say 'Danny, can you give me a ride to the Glee Club?' and that was my cue," he said.

Heroic rescues and tragedy

After high school, he was drafted into the army. As a medic in Korea, he saw up close the horrors of war. He became a hometown hero when he dove into a hurricane-swollen river to rescue a truck driver. Thanks to the military, he put himself through col-

lege, joining the wrestling team and the glee club. He was even elected student body president. During this period, he also endured one of the worst tragedies of his life while working at a summer camp. One day, Smith took his young charges to see an old reservoir where he noticed a commotion: a girl had drifted too far and couldn't be found.

She was eventually pulled ashore, and Smith found a clear pulse. But when he went to begin mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on the girl, who was white, he heard a policeman cry out: "She's already dead!" Smith instantly realized the cop would rather see her die than be saved by a black man, and so he stopped. Decades on, the episode still makes his stomach turn. "It's very emotional," he says. "You talk about things people have to carry throughout their life. And that bugs me, that bugs me."

'I have a dream'

After graduating, Smith became a hospital social worker, sharing a dorm with Barry Fritz, a young Jewish man studying to be a psychologist. The pair



This undated image courtesy of Dan Smith and Loretta Neumann, shows Dan Smith's father, Abram Smith, born the property of a white man in Massies Mill, Virginia in 1863.



This 1936 image courtesy of Dan Smith and Loretta Neumann, shows Dan Smith at the age of 4.

would debate the issues of the day, and Fritz persuaded Smith to attend a civil rights march in Washington, despite his misgivings. After getting lost on the drive, they were pleasantly surprised when a policeman pulled them over-and led them to a house where other marchers were staying.

The next morning, they found themselves standing on steps of the Lincoln Memorial, where they witnessed King's iconic "I have a dream" speech. "It was emotional... there were black and white... everyone in America was there," said Smith. Though the march awakened his sense of activism, he headed to Alabama as planned to pursue a graduate education and his dreams of becoming a veterinarian.

'Pull over!'

He tried to settle down to his studies-but by the mid-1960s, the southern state had become the epicenter of the growing US civil rights movement, and people were pouring in to join the fight. The college's president approached him and urged him to put his scholarly pursuits on hold, saying Smith's leadership skills from his undergraduate days could help the movement. Smith started working on a literacy program for poor black people, and was later placed in charge of a civil rights project in Lowndes County, where 80 percent of residents were black and weren't registered to vote. Smith almost became a martyr for the cause.

First, white supremacists burned his office building to the ground. Undeterred, Smith then worked from a trailer. One evening as he drove home, he noticed he was being tailed by a car full of youths. The vehicle eventually pulled up next to him and they screamed racial slurs, demanding he pull off the highway. The chase went on for 25 miles. Smith finally saw a gas station on the outskirts of Montgomery-full of black customers. He swerved in, and his assailants drove on.

Marching on

In 1968, Smith moved to Washington, where he bought a house and raised two children with his first wife. He also began a career as a federal worker. He founded a national training program for primary

care physicians that runs to this day, which he considers his crowning achievement. His boss took a chance on putting a black man in charge of such a major project in 1972 — but unlike other officials at his level, he wasn't even assigned his own secretary. Smith retired in the 1990s. He served as an usher at the Washington National Cathedral, where he met presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Obama.

He was also deeply involved in the creation of the Korean War Memorial in 1995. In 2006, the cathedral hosted his own wedding to Loretta Neumann, an environmental activist and longtime federal worker who is white. This summer, as Black Lives Matter protests rocked the country, the couple joined in. For a moment, Smith is overcome with emotion, dabbing his eye with a tissue. Then he regains the old fire. "You can write a little check, you can send a nickel, but everyone in this country should be concerned and should be involved," he says. — AFP



This 1965 image courtesy of Dan Smith and Loretta Neumann, shows Dan Smith and his mother, Clara Wheeler Smith, at his wedding. — AFP photos