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Mothering a Mama Duck

By Cathy Dausman



'Papa Duck' Dan Brunicardi stands next to the storm drain where it all began. Photo Cathy Dausman

This is a Mother's Day story about a man ... and some ducks.

Dan Brunicardi's Lafayette neighbors used to call him "The Mayor" because he looked out for his fellow residents. Apparently, he'll do that even when those residents can't speak, or they waddle when they walk.

Now Brunicardi has a new title, given to him by neighbor and author Pauline Reif, who captured the true story of Brunicardi and his duckling rescue in her first children's book, "Papa Duck." The book was illustrated by Eugenie Huard, a neighbor of Reif and Brunicardi.

The story began two summers ago, when Brunicardi stepped out his front door to walk his dogs. In a neighborhood lush with trees, he wasn't surprised to see a brown duck standing curbside, but he was surprised when it wouldn't budge even when he approached.

Brunicardi detoured around the self-imposed mallard roadblock, but became concerned when he returned half an hour later, and she was still there. Locking the dogs in his back yard, Brunicardi said he confronted the duck, gently asking her "What's wrong?" The mallard seemed to be guarding the storm drain, from which peeping could be heard.

Looking down the drain, Brunicardi noticed nine fuzzy black ducklings floating in circles two feet below street level, unable to escape. Although Brunicardi said he is "not a strong man," he lifted and slid the storm grate out of the way. Then, lying in the street on his stomach, Brunicardi corralled the ducklings with cardboard and picked each one up, housing them temporarily in a five gallon bucket, where he said they showed their exuberance "by jumping like popcorn."

Mama Duck seemed most grateful. By then, a neighbor or two was watching, as were at least three cats. Concerned about the cats' possible involvement, Brunicardi ran interference. This is after all a Mother's Day story, so it ends on a happy note.

With Mama Duck in the lead, her babies waddled in V-formation after her. Brunicardi took up the rear, flapping his arms and quacking to encourage the entourage and discourage the cats. He said it was a bit like going on a cattle drive. "I felt like [I was on the TV show] Rawhide," Brunicardi said.

Mama and her nine ducklings made it safely to a nearby creek, where their part of the story ended.

Then it was Reif's turn. "When Dan first dropped by to tell me this story, I knew it needed to be written," she said.

She began calling Brunicardi "Papa Duck," and wrote her first children's book with the same title to record the event. "I recently read 'Papa Duck' in my granddaughter's first grade classroom," she said. "The children were enthralled."

Brunicardi has his own copy of the book to remember the day, as well as a single black down feather which is still on his refrigerator.

So that is how "The Mayor" became "Papa Duck." And they all lived happily ever after!

You can see how the "Papa Duck" story unfolds online at www.papaduckstory.com.



Image provided

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