



FILE PHOTOS BY PETER CASOLINO — REGISTER

Border collie Tyne, 9, rounds up the sheep on North Guilford's Dragon Fly Farm with owner Ellen Rusconi-Black.

# The shepherdess and so much more

## Remembering Ellen Rusconi-Black of North Guilford

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**NORTH GUILFORD** » Not far from the stall Ellen Rusconi-Black and her husband Bill set up at the Dudley Farm farmer's market on Saturday mornings stands the barn at Dudley Farm, once considered the epicenter of North Guilford.

If there were a person who personified North Guilford in all its rich history, saltbox pragmatism, and old-fashioned ingenuity, Ellen Rusconi-Black, who died in late April after a brief illness at the age of 58, would be on the short list.

Take her work with border collies. The woman who delightedly called herding "the oldest profession known (considered moral, legal, and acceptable)" got her first dog in 1997 on the condition that she train



Peig, a 3-year-old border collie, rounds up the sheep on the Dragon Fly Farm with owner Ellen Rusconi-Black.

her to compete in sheep-dog trials, which have been called the most difficult test of human-dog communication ever devised.

As much as she thrilled to the challenge of the trials, she also reveled in the balanced dance of dog and sheep, choreographed by the trainer, that she prac-

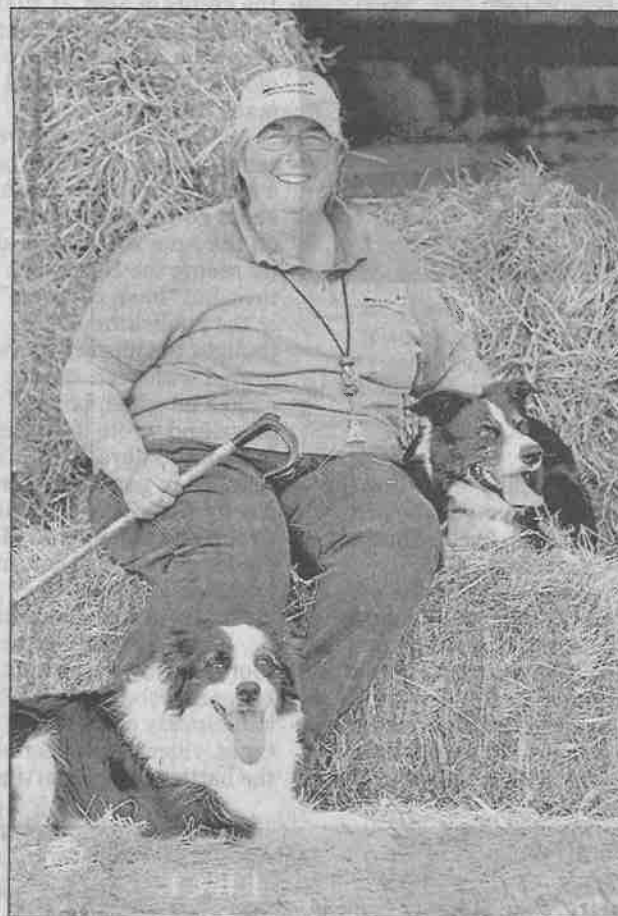
ticed and refined each day on the farm.

"They live to work," she said last spring with her usual exuberance, holding a shepherd's crook in her hand as she regarded a dozen sheep grazing in the emerald-green fields of the farm that had been in her family since 1835.

"The way they linger at my side, looking up at me, waiting for their next assignment, I just love that."

That led to the business she started with her husband Bill, "Up, Up, and Away," using her border collies to prevent Canada geese from despoiling athletic fields, ponds and corporate grounds.

For her, deploying the dogs to scatter the geese, which are at once a protected species and a rank nuisance, was a matter of common sense — and a wonder.



Border collies Peig, 3, top and Tyne, 9, take a break with Ellen Rusconi-Black on the farm.

"It's so neat," she said. "The dogs can stalk the geese because they carry themselves like coyotes, which are the geese's natural predators. The birds fly away to an area where they feel no pressure and no harm. Everyone wins."

That this process often consumed hours is all the more extraordinary, considering that the thriving "Up, Up, and Away"

and her work as trainer and handler were only sidelines to her main occupation: as an investigator for nonprofit organizations enabling the independence of adults with mental and physical handicaps.

On top of that she wrote grants to support other nonprofit organizations and dozens of articles with headlines like "Skunk De-

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odorant Formula," "This Really Happened!" and "Some Days" for wildlife magazines. She also traveled to fairs and festivals to demonstrate her shepherding skills.

In what spare time she had, she knitted sweaters, mittens, gloves, and hats from the wool of the sheep her dogs herded. Some warmed her and Bill through the winter. Others she sold down the road at the Dudley Farm farmer's market on Saturday mornings.

It is perhaps coincidental that May 31 there will be a brunch to raise funds for renovating the barn at Dudley Farm, building by building. And that among other items, a tea cosy knitted by Black will be part of the silent auction.

Or perhaps it's no coincidence at all. Ellen Rusconi-Black might not have been the epicenter of North Guilford, but by her life, her work and, above all, her character, she enlivened, deepened, and perpetuated its identity.



Ellen Rusconi-Black and border collie Tyne round up the sheep and goats and bring them home on Dragon Fly Farm.