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Bates shares story about his feline office companion

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – If Furrball was a Navajo Nation government, she would have received a raise for outstanding work.

But she does have the unofficial, official title of Navajo Nation Office of the Speaker Mouse Catcher.

Or maybe it should be Mouse Killer.

Speaker LoRenzo Bates said Furrball came to his office when he was speaker pro tem.

Bates became pro tem in April 2014, after the council placed then Speaker Johnny Naize on administrative leave with pay for not maintaining his “good standing” qualification to be speaker.

Naize’s good standing came into question after the tribal Special Prosecutors filed criminal charges of bribery and conspiracy to commit bribery involving tribal discretionary funds against him.

In September 2014, Naize pleaded guilty and resigned.

The Council voted to have Bates continue as pro tem because a new Council was being inaugurated in January.

In January, after a tie-vote by the Council, Bates became speaker. His opponent for speaker, Delegate Alton Shepherd handed the speakership to Bates because he wanted unity in the Council and among the people.

Mouse killer

Bates recalled that when he was speaker pro tem that legislative staff complained about “mouse problems” in the two legislative buildings.

“Employees would come to work and find mouse droppings in their coffee cups and everywhere,” he said.

Bates said his office tried getting rid of the mice through the tribal policies and procedures for mice removal but that didn’t work.

He recalled, “We were all talking one morning about the mouse problem and I said, ‘I’ll get a

cat. A cat will take care of it.''

Bates said that one of his employees knew another employee that had a cat that just had a litter of kittens.

“Furrball came on board when she was six weeks old,” he remembered.

Bates said that legislative staff contributed money for her litter and food.

The contributions are now made on a monthly basis, he said.

“As she got older, the mice issues started to go away in both buildings,” he said. “As of today, we have not heard an employee report mouse droppings or sightings of mice.”

Cat problems

Bates explained that the only problem that the legislative office has had is “issues with the cleaning crew.”

Bates also said that one of the tribal government custodians was allergic to cats and so she refused to clean the legislative buildings. He tried to resolve the allergy problem by suggesting that the custodian with the allergy clean another building.

But instead the cleaning crew quit cleaning the legislative buildings, which resulted in Bates hiring a Navajo-owned cleaning company to clean the legislatives buildings.

And then Bates said they had problems with the Navajo Office of Safety and Health Administration.

“They wanted to take her away,” he recalled. “I was in a meeting and the staff interrupted my meeting to tell me, ‘They’re taking Furrball.’ So I had to leave my meeting and deal with NOSHA.”

When Bates came out of his meeting, he saw a NOSHA worker with Furrball in his arms.

Bates also noticed that the worker had his protective clothing on, which included a thick jacket.

He stopped the worker and tried talking to him but the worker’s response was to cite NOSHA rules and regulations, apologize and say that his bosses sent him.

After Bates politely asked the worker to have his bosses come and meet with him, the worker released Furrball, who ran down the hallway.

“She used one of her nine lives that day,” Bates said.

After the incident with NOSHA, Bates decided to get legal counsel.

Domestic animal in building

Bates told the legislative attorneys about NOSHA and Furrball and asked them to research domestic animals in public buildings.

Bates then invited the tribal management department to meet with him about Furrball.

“All they asked, after we described the mice issue, was for us to post a notice at the front office door that there was a domestic animal in the building,” he explained. “So that notice is up and she’s been with us for a year now.”

Bates laughed as he talked about Furrball’s behavior after a three-day tribal holiday and she’s been in the office by herself for that amount of time.

“We come back to work and she just terrorizes,” he said laughing. “She’s just upset because she’s been alone for three days.”

So how does Furrball terrorize?

Bates said she walks in front of staff to get attention but when they try to pet her, she’ll use her paw to push away their hands.

“After she get over her attitude, she’s alright,” he said. “I tell employees she has a permanent PAF as long as she takes care of mice issue. She does her job.”

A PAF is the acronym for personnel action form or document showing that an individual is a tribal government employee.

Brings calmness

Bates noted that Furrball has been fixed or spayed and has all of her shots.

“We get her claws filed down,” he said. “We thought about declawing her but if she goes outside, she’ll have no way of protecting herself. The employees feel that declawing is cruel. So we decided to just her nails taken care of.”

Bates said that when the office is open, Furrball will sit by the door and look outside but she never goes outside.

“She’s great for the office,” he said. “She brings calmness. Delegates come into the office and they pet her. Everybody that comes to office pets her. She’s pretty famous. Kids come in and the first thing they ask is ‘Where’s Furrball?’

“She had the run of the office,” Bates added. “But I don’t let her come into meetings in the conference room because she’ll interrupt and disturb folks in the meeting.”

Cat space

He said that her space is a wooden filing box that sits at the corner of the secretary’s desk.

“That’s her space,” Bates said. “Ever since she was a kitten, she wandered around the office until she found that space.”

He remembered that the first file box was plastic.

“As she grew, she broke that one,” Bates said. “We ended up going to wood. We tried a metal filing box but she didn’t like that.”

He said that his staff got the wooden filing box and even reinforced it.

“Documents are supposed to go in there,” Bates said.

There were times that someone did put a document in the wooden filing box but that didn’t stop Furrball from laying on it and going to sleep.

Bates said Furrball is real playful and knows when an unfamiliar person is walking down the office hall.

“She’ll hide in a doorway and when that individual walks by, she’ll jump out at them and scare them,” he said laughing.

If it was obvious from the stories that Bates told about his Furrball and his laughter as he talked about Furrball that Furrball was more than a mouse killer for him and his staff.