By Jim Langham

A message on Facebook a couple of days ago reminded me of a dog from my childhood that once raised a litter of kittens.

Pepper was a lop-eared coal-black Cocker Spaniel, my first as a child. We obtained her from an elderly lady in Berne (Indiana) who felt she could no longer care for the frisky pup with all of her energy.

So we took her to our country residence and cultivated a warm dog house beneath a tree in the apple orchard behind our house. But Pepper wasn't the only pet that we had. Somehow, along the way, we started giving homes to cats. One particular cat that I recall became sick shortly after she had given birth to a litter of several kittens. Within days, the kittens had lost their mother.

At first we sought to nurture the little of growing kittens with a small bottle of milk, and then with baby food. They slept in a warm box with a blanket in the garage.

One morning when I went out to feed the kittens, they were gone. At first I panicked; I ran into the house and in distressed tones told my mother that the kittens were gone. She came outside to institute a search. Suddenly, she said, "Jim, listen, do you hear that?" Sure enough, it was the kittens. They sounded healthy, but their whereabouts was still a mystery – until Pepper shook her chain and came out of her house, with the entire litter of kittens clinging to his long shaggy hair. They had moved in with Pepper and to our surprise, had been fully adopted.

For the next several weeks, the caring pup literally raised the kittens, stepping aside so they could drink and eat before her, allowing them to climb all over her and snuggle up with her in her doghouse at night, and caring for them as though she were their mother. It was an unbelievable show of kindness and care in the world of nature as Pepper literally raised the kittens until they could finally wander out on their own.

Uniquely, I had learned a lesson that I was to see carried out by my parents many times in the world of humans when they reached out to help those with need, even providing housing for several weeks for a family that had lost their home in a fire.

Years later, our children had the opportunity to become part of similar experiences during their young childhood days in our country home in Branch County, Mich.

Though it can't be proven, it always seemed to us like our residence at that time had a natural affinity for attracting animals with need. Many times dogs or cats were somehow attracted to our doorstep. Most of the time, we could identify the owners and return them to their rightful homes. On other occasions, we would feed them and give them shelter, perhaps for a night. The next day when we would turn them back to their environment, they would usually go on their way to wherever they were going.

One exception was the kitten quickly named "Snowflake," a tiny black-and-white kitty that got hit on the road in front of our house. Carefully, Joyce and the children rescued the injured kitty and made a "hospital bed" composed of a small box, straw and covers. For days, Snowflake (once referred to as "Cornflake" by one of the children at the time) attempted to lift her head as the children would take baby vitamins, milk and baby Tylenol to her in an eye dropper. In addition, Joyce had tied a bandage around a huge wound in the kitten's stomach.

One day a week later, when the children went to feed Snowflake, the box was empty, just like the box of the kittens of my youth. Like me, they ran into the house telling their mother of the kitten's plight in fearful voices. This time, when Joyce and the children walked outside, they spotted Snowflake about five or six feet from her box. She had managed to crawl out and slowly creep into the yard in a search for independence. This time she came back, but eventually, just like the dove that never came back to Noah after the flood, one day the kitten jumped into our arms, never to return to the box again.

For the next 20 years, Snowflake gave a litter of kittens to our children and then became a loving family pet that eventually moved with us to Ohio and became a real part of our family until she finally passed of old age, two decades beyond her near-fatal accident along a country road in Michigan.

As I had many years ago, the children learned to love, care for and nurture the fallen and hurt back to healing with tender love and care, an attitude they carry with them today in their professional care of mentally and physically handicapped people.

Back to the Facebook message that opened my heart to this train of thought, our friend from Oklahoma wrote:

“I had the privilege of helping a sweet little miniature greyhound puppy who was lost in the cold ... getting him back home safely to his frantic mom’s loving arms. Her tearful reunion and her loving embrace to both me and her lost pup were so touching ... that sweet little boy cried and shivered until I put him inside my warm jacket, embraced him tightly, and spoke comfortable to him softly. It is a reminder of how God is constantly embracing us ... even when we are lost and so far from Him. How He warms us, soothes us, and never lets us go. All praise and glory to Him! Sleep tight my sweet and new little furry friend.”