



# Mary Meeks

## URNS TRAGEDY INTO VICTORY!

By Kathy Hosler

The wail of sirens filled the air as emergency vehicles rushed to the scene. Mary Meeks watched helplessly as the hungry flames broke through the roof and shot a hundred feet into the night sky.

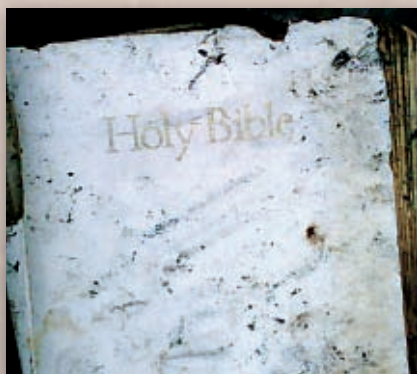
*Nature's Specialties*, the company Mary had helped build from the ground up, was on fire. Everything that she had worked so hard to build was being devoured.

The devastation that happened in that fire would have been more than most people could handle. But, Mary Meeks is a survivor. She sees problems as challenges, not obstacles. Not only that, when Mary Meeks decides to do something, she gives it one hundred percent — and then some. It's been that way ever since she entered the pet care industry.

Mary always had a deep love for animals, and in 1978 this determined single mother found a way to turn that love into a career. She purchased a small pet store that had a part time groomer. Mary planned to do everything that she could to make her business grow.

She learned grooming basics by starting as a brusher/bather, and in a short while she was a full-fledged groomer. "When different suppliers came into my shop," said Mary, "I wanted to learn everything from A to Z about all of the grooming products."

Her business grew to the point that it took a staff of eight to keep up



with the demand. She was working seven days a week, twelve hours a day.

"During my busy time," said Mary. "We were grooming between 80-120 dogs a day. I was buying what I felt were the best shampoos available at the time; but I wasn't happy. I wasn't getting the results I wanted, and they were harsh on the bather's hands."

"At that time, I was seeing a chemist, Joe Meeks, who later became my husband," shared Mary. "I was telling him how dissatisfied I was with what I was using.

In an effort to help me, Joe called the company and made some suggestions on things they could do to improve their products, but they

didn't want to listen to him. With that," Mary said, "I decided that if I wanted a superior product, I would have to create it myself."

"I explained to Joe exactly what I wanted," said Mary, "and I asked him to formulate it for me. He made me a test batch, and I knew that this was what I was looking for."

Joe and Mary took samples to other grooming shops for them to try. Soon, Mary and Joe were busy filling orders. They started the company that we know today as *Nature's Specialties*. Once again, Mary was building a business. Together, Joe and Mary laid the foundation for a line of grooming products unlike anything the pet industry had seen.

One thing Mary was sure of from the start was that they were going to use only natural oils, not insecticides, in their products. One reason for that was because Mary found out that the lead levels in her body were off the charts. Readings like hers can be caused by insecticide exposure. Years ago, Mary and many other groomers routinely used products that contained ingredients such as Lindane. Many didn't wear gloves and other protection and were unaware of the toxicity of

the products.

Some people laughed at Mary's plan to remove all insecticides and chemicals from the *Nature's Specialties* product line and said, "What do you expect to do with that?"

"NOT poison ourselves!" Mary replied emphatically. Then she explained. "It's going back to basics. Some of the natural oils go back to biblical times. They do the job and eliminate the problem. Why use an insecticide when a natural product can achieve the same thing and not be harmful to you or the pet?"

Today, *Nature's Specialties* has about 60 products in their lineup, and all of them are non-toxic and biodegradable. *Nature's Specialties* has become an industry leader known for their exceptional products. This family-run company has distributors nationwide and internationally.

Mary is now the President of *Nature's Specialties*, and her brother, Bob Harris, is the Director of Operations. Mary and Bob routinely visit grooming salons and talk to groomers at trade shows to get their input; then they formulate new products to meet those needs.

"It's a good time to be a groomer," says Mary. "Even at this time, many salons that I have visited are only slightly affected by the recession. And, this recession has taken major industries down."

Since its inception in 1986, *Nature's Specialties* has continued to grow and groomers all over the world are using their products. Mary worked hard and she was seeing her dreams become reality. Life was good.

Then on Wednesday, February 11, 2009 the unthinkable happened. A fire destroyed the 48,000 square foot building that housed *Nature's Specialties* and a toy distributor next door. Mary, Bob, and many of their friends and employees watched in horror and disbelief as the flames consumed everything.

"To this day, no one knows how the fire started," explains Mary. "Everything in our business was shut down – not even a computer was on. Thank God, no one was hurt."

Even though they were devastated by their loss, Mary and Bob never thought about quitting. "We watched the fire in the morning," said Mary,



“It makes you know that you should be grateful for what you have... Things can change in the blink of an eye. You never think that something like this can happen to you.”

"and in the afternoon we were setting up our trade show booth at *Groom & Kennel Expo* in Pasadena."

"The Corona Chamber of Commerce was at the fire site early Thursday morning with a list of buildings we could look at and use temporarily," said Mary. "Neighboring businesses opened their doors and offered us the loan of equipment. Even our competitors in the pet industry offered to help us by letting us use their facilities. Within 30 days, we were blending again and resuming production."

Has the fire changed Mary in any way?

"It makes you know that you should be grateful for what you have," says Mary. "Things can change in the blink of an eye. You never think that something like this can happen to you. We had insurance," Mary continues, "But you're never covered as well as you think you are."

Their building, materials, equipment, finished product – everything was lost. Well, almost everything...

"We had a fire-proof file safe that did not burn. It contained the backed-up CD's of our product formulas," said Mary. "And, one other thing didn't burn up; in fact, it was untouched. In the midst of all the ashes and devastation, there was a white Bible. It was lying out in the open and not even one page was scorched. It gave me the faith to keep going."

"This experience has been very humbling," says Mary. "It has also been truly inspiring. The outpouring of help, support, words of encouragement, and prayers, has been truly overwhelming."

"All of us at *Nature's Specialties*

thank you from the bottom of our hearts, and want you to know that – we're back!

What else would you expect from an amazing woman like Mary Meeks?

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