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The Rat Lady: A day in the life of Cathe Boudreau Alleger

By David Hare

Cathe Boudreau Alleger suffers from a rare connective joint disorder called Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome. Symptoms include chronic joint and limb pain; Alleger's joints, such as her elbow or shoulder, regularly dislocate of their own volition.

Of the six types of EDS, Alleger has hypermobility, which affects one person in 100,000. It's easy to see why someone such as her might feel alone in the world or, at the very least, singled out.

But Alleger isn't alone. Wheelchair-bound 60 percent of the time, she spends most of the day confined to her home, where she lives with her boyfriend and the 15 rats she calls children.

Luckily, she has 21 years of performing stand-up comedy under her belt, so spare her the cutting remarks about the unseemly nature of rats; she's heard it all before - and yet she still keeps a straight face when she says, "My rats are a form of therapy."

When the pain in her joints becomes unbearable, as it often does, Alleger finds comfort in the beady eyes of her extended rodent family.

"They're very clean," the 38-year-old Alleger says of her pets, dispelling the myth that rats are dirty, disease-ridden pests. And they're also trainable, she says.

When *CityLife* arrives one morning at Alleger's residence, she says the rats haven't had time to warm up, so they might not be up to performing their usual array of tricks.


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It's impressive enough that the rats appear to respond whenever Alleger calls for them; who needs to see a rat play dead or roll over?

Except for Ernie Kovacs and Danny Bonaduce, each of Alleger's rats is named after a character from different science-fiction novels.

There's Adam, Dave (no relation to the author of this article), Chiana, PepperLaRue and Dante. All of them know their names and come to Alleger when called. A few of the more talented ones have learned how to play the Milton Bradley board game Operation, only without the punishing buzzer effect (PETA members take note).

The rats can also sit and fetch; at least one of them is skilled in the art of dodging questions from another type of vermin: a reporter.

"So, why are some people afraid of you?"

No comment.

"Has society unfairly characterized your kind as nothing more than a bunch of no-good, malevolent, filthy pests? Corrupt carriers of bubonic plague and typhus?"



Nothing doing; this rat wasn't talking.

Alleger jumps in and continues the interview.

Yes, she says, the public's perception of rats has been skewed a great deal by the dream makers and horror masters of Hollywood. When rats aren't being portrayed in movies as bands of ravenous, marauding vermin (a la *Willard*), usually they're tossed in to give the audience a quick cheap thrill.

None of this bothers Alleger too much, however, since she earns some of her income contracting out her rats for commercial work, including films, television and music videos.

All she asks of clients is that they sign a waiver agreeing to treat her rats with dignity and respect. One stipulation reads, "The animals may be nervous at first, and may react by urinating, defecating, or nipping."

This seems hardly an unreasonable condition when one considers the same stipulation could apply to other performers, such as babies or Julia Roberts.

In the coming weeks, viewers of Showtime cable network will be able to catch Alleger's rats performing in a special for local magicians Penn and Teller.

Alleger has lived with Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome longer than she's cared for rats. Born and educated in Boston, she was first diagnosed with EDS when she was 17. It wasn't until she reached her early 30s, however, that the disease began to manifest.

She started exhibiting more symptoms, including loose or unstable joints that are prone to frequent dislocations. During the course of our brief interview, one of her knees popped out momentarily.

Also, she held up her hands to show how her bones begin their daily act of atrophying; her fingers appeared more stiff and gnarled the longer we talked.

That's when the rats can be a girl's best friend. Besides being well-behaved and easy to care for, she can stroke their fur even though she might be unable to use her hands to lift a glass.

"They are such great pacifists," she says. "Just like most other pets, they look to you for everything.

"You get that same unconditional love."

Alleger's infatuation with rats started in 1998, when she was working at a Renaissance fair in Southern California. She was dressed as an Italian noblewoman, when she made the uncharacteristic decision to place a live rat on her shoulder as she strolled the grounds.

She became so attached to her new friend that by the end of that summer she'd purchased her first rat. A few years later, when she and her boyfriend moved to the warmer climate of Las Vegas on doctor's orders, she had expanded her family to include a total of 11 rats.

The average lifespan of lab-bred rats is only two to three years, compared to wild rats that can live up to 10 years. This means Alleger has attended a lot of rat funerals over the years.

On her bookshelf, she keeps a wooden box that contains the cremated remains of all the rats she's owned over the years.

Every six months or so she buys another rat to keep her family thriving.

"For some of us, pets are our children," she says. "I feel honored to have them in my life."

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