



No More Homeless Pets Forum  
June 13-17, 2005

## What Inspires Us

**This week YOU are the forum guest!** How did you get started helping homeless animals? Did a specific, life-changing event galvanize your mission, or was it a gradual process? Have you found creative ways to inspire new potential volunteers? When we understand why we turn to this work, we can understand how to involve fresh newcomers, as well!

### Inspiration from a Special Animal

#### **Submission from Alex:**

I'd like to contribute my story on how I came to form a volunteer group to implement Trap, Neuter, Return (TNR).

I'd just relocated from Ohio to Pennsylvania because of a job, and was new to the area. I found an adoption center of one of the city shelters near my workplace. I went there during lunch to socialize the cats, and through the grapevine, was put in touch with two of the local no-kill cat rescue groups. I had heard that they needed help taming feral kittens and cats, and thought it would be a good challenge.

Within 2 days, Luke came to me. He was trapped as a feral, 4-month old kitten and had not done well at the past two foster homes in 6 months, and the rescue group was desperate for a place for him. Using an animal communicator (telepathic), which was also experimental for me at that time, we bonded almost immediately.

Although I 'failed' at this first fostering attempt (we officially adopted him about 4 months later), he opened my world to the plight of feral cats. By volunteering with both rescues to work with feral kittens and young adults, I came to further understand the magnitude of the problem on a local level. And because of Alley Cat Allies ([www.alleycat.org](http://www.alleycat.org)) and their National Feral Cat Day (<http://www.nationalferalcatday.org/>), I worked with another volunteer to start our TNR group with a simple information table at the local PetCo where we held adoption days regularly.

Two years later, Luke is a well adjusted, happy camper in our home of 6 cats, and continues to progress daily with his 'bravery' and socialization. It is because of him that my passion is

implementing TNR, educating the public about it, and helping cooperative feeders to become 'caregivers' to their colony cats for life.

Also in this process, we have formed a partnership with one of the local shelters to begin implementing TNR within the city limits. The problem had grown so large mostly in part because the stray and ferals have been 'ignored' for decades, and now has reached epidemic proportions. With a new Executive Director who is open to partnerships and innovation, we now have a very good chance at reducing the number of ferals taken in and therefore euthanized at the shelter. We will announce our partnership to the public sometime late summer/early fall and still need to work out the details of our cooperative TNR program.

We have found that our newsletter, placed at pet stores, mailed and distributed at adoption days, is finally turning up results of not only cases, but donations toward our cause. We are still struggling with recruiting volunteers with the dedication required to implement the TNR though, so any suggestions are welcome!

#### **Submission from Marilyn:**

"Skye" waltzed into my life in June of 1990. He was a thirty-pound puppy with paws as big as coffee mugs. Soon, our clown-pup matured into a wise and noble dog. During quiet times, he'd lay by the bookshelves, front paws crossed, head held high, seemingly lost in thought. Our conversations consisted of nudges, gentle tugs and the stroking of his fur. Passing through the stages of his life much too fast, and before I was ready, my best friend was gone. The places where my large companion rested and slept are now so obviously empty. "I'll never get over missing him," I told my husband. What do I do now? How do I fill the void?

Skye had been a joyful pet and his manner noble, and I sensed my mourning would only hinder his journey from his earth-bound frame to his becoming a brilliant spirit. I know what he would want, I thought. I found a local animal rescue and volunteered to work with pets that aren't fortunate enough to be part of a family. Caring for the homeless pets reminds me that each of us must celebrate, not mourn, the dance of life and death.

#### **Submission from Susan:**

I'll never, ever forget where my inspiration came from. When I was a young girl (11-12), my family and I lived in a rather rural subdivision. My father was away in Vietnam, and my mother was left to take care of 3 children and a household by herself. We had outside cats that just kept multiplying. I don't know why my mother never had them spayed and neutered; maybe this was not something she was aware of at that time. I'll never know. But, we had 13 cats, and my

favorite one, Elizabeth, was pregnant again and due any day. She suddenly disappeared. I looked and looked for her, but she was nowhere to be found. My mother finally admitted that she and my older brother had "taken Elizabeth for a ride in the country" because we didn't need any more cats. I know my mother was convinced at the time that Elizabeth would find a good home in the country chasing mice in a barn, and would live happily ever after.

One of my current fosters had been a stray, rescued from a rural area. When I got her, she was highly pregnant, horribly emaciated, had a broken jaw and was missing her left eye. The vet felt sure that she had been hit by a car. She gave birth to four kittens the night of the day I took her in. I later learned that she originated from a person who had lots of unaltered cats, and this person would take them for one-way rides in the country.

This particular cat had actually made it back home a time or two, yet the person kept hauling her off farther and farther until she finally didn't return anymore. She obviously was hit by a car, starved and had become pregnant. I shudder to think of what would have happened to her four kittens. To this day it makes me very tearful to think that something like this - or worse - happened to my Elizabeth from so many years ago. In memory of my own cat, I named this foster Elizabeth.

**Submission from Sheryl:**

When I was growing up my family always adopted pets in need of homes, either from shelters or directly off the streets. I entered adulthood doing the same. More than five years ago, my husband and I took in two cats being relinquished when their owner married someone allergic to cats.

Something about my connection with the young male Bengal cat, Bailey, changed me. I am not sure exactly what happened except to say that he became my soul companion and this changed everything. I began researching the plight of homeless animals – and of all suffering animals including pets, animals in entertainment, farm and other “product” animals, and wildlife.

I became a vegan to minimize my impact in living, and at the same time I began feeding my cats a whole-carcass raw diet because I want them to have the healthiest, most natural diet possible.

I also became active in several animal organizations and a visible animal advocate in my community. My husband and I attended a No More Homeless Pets conference and visited Best Friends Animal Sanctuary.

Back home, I coordinated a 3-day multimedia speaking tour for the president of the New England Anti-Vivisection Society, wrote grants for the regional Humane Society, helped start a feral cat TNR program, and became acquainted with my local, state and federal legislators, who now know me and my concerns. I just joined the board of directors of the International Institute for Humane Education. In September, I start school to obtain my Master of Science degree in Organization & Management, which I plan to use in service of animals and all life.

## Reasons of a Spiritual Nature

### **Submission from Ricky:**

Growing up in rural upstate New York, I had the privilege of being around all kinds of animals.

After college I was career motivated and lost touch with the animals and myself. Now, ten years after graduating college, I did some soul searching during Lent being that I am Roman Catholic. I recalled a time when I was most happy in my life and that time was when I worked with animals and had pets. It was this inner reflection that led me to contact the local humane society and start my volunteer work. The animals give back more love than I could ever give them.

I am once again happy and happiness is what it is all about. I am hoping that this leads into a complete career change in the near future. This is my story on what inspired me to start back with that which makes me most happy...the animals.

### **Submission from Judi:**

I was inspired by many things, but mainly by sharing my life with two cats. And by seeing their distinct personalities, the love and affection they give, and how I have bonded with them.

What galvanized me was a near death experience (a near fatal auto accident) that I survived I am told only by a miracle. I felt that God had a reason and I thought and thought what that might be - finally, it came to me. To help as many animals as I could, in whatever small way I could - just to somehow help. My love of cats/kittens made me focus on them. I preach the advantages of pet ownership to as many people as I come across when it makes sense to bring up the subject.

### **Submission from Sheryl:**

I didn't have a life event, however, have always felt a closeness to animals and their plight/feelings. Part of this is religious - Judaism teaches that we take care of animals before ourselves. That and my deep love of all creatures leads me to my present life of having animals,

helping feral cats in my area, rescuing animals (all) to the best of my ability to find them help, and holding a deep respect for the animal world. They give so much and ask so little.

**Submission from Lis:**

My grandfather had a ranch/farm loaded with animals. He was always gentle and kind with them and with children. Growing up there were always animals in the house, despite the difficulty and number of tears required to move them, as we were a military family. When I had my own family, I noted that the Bible charged man to care for animals and that children raised with animals quickly learned manners and gentleness.

Now that my circumstances dictate that I can give back to the community, I could find no better cause. I have three shelter/feral cats; and two shelter dogs. I will have more, I am sure, as the family changes and my beloved companions cross the Rainbow Bridge. I tell everyone where my wonderful pets came from. They are walking advertisements that love can overcome a sad beginning.

## Once upon a time, when I was just a child...

**Submission from Rose:**

My story is very much like the lady on Animal Planet who talks to animals. I was very abused as a child from birth (I was so neglected I came close to death), but nobody really took me from my parents. This was when I would hide in the woods to avoid the abuse and my parent's fights. The animals took care of me, in a way.

A young doe butted me into a bed they made under an evergreen, where it was very warm. The deer also showed me what to eat and they knew that humans can't eat some things deer eat! Bears helped me, too. They were the kind with the cream colored noses and dark brown fur. So I guess I owe animals my life!

Also, I have lived at two places where we were out in the wilds and people would drop off their unwanted animals. This is so disgusting. Those animals are so terrified! I healed some and kept some. Some found new owners on their own! I just love animals and have always had a knack for mimicking their sounds and "hearing" them. I can't see how others can't tell what they are saying, to some degree. They do a lot of "body talk!"

**Submission from Richie:**

I began my crusade back in the winter of 1975, feeding stray cats (I had a colony of 8) every day after school I rode my bike to the woods and fed them their dinner. Until a couple months later a lady told me to bring them to a no kill shelter for them to get fixed and put up for adoption.

That began my journey in the world of animal welfare advocate! I was only 10, but learned the skills of feeding, medicating, and adoptions. That lasted from 1975 - 1987 and it was well worth it!

You see, I always knew my specialty was to help the voiceless, whether by volunteering, or attending demos/educational outreaches!

Then in '95 I began my next step: to increase my knowledge and speak out for the animals in labs, fur farms, circuses, puppy mills, factory farming, etc!

Today I work with the consumer industry of pet care needs, and also with the veganism products that are on the rise. New merchandise for the vegan consumer is rising. Non-animal testing methods are increasing; there is HOPE out there yet! No, we're not done yet, there's still more things to do! More and more vegan communities are coming! No more homeless pets/no kill nation is approaching at an amazing force! There are more advocates doing what they can: writing, attending conferences, rescuing and foster. Advocates come in all shapes, sizes, colors and ages, remember that animals don't discriminate! I am proud to know every advocate I have met.

I'm happy with good friends and more friends and good people I care about. I hang out with positive people and life gets better for animals and people!

**Submission from Sandra:**

I have enjoyed these forums very much. My concern for homeless pets has been part of a gradual process that was inspired by a fateful day when I was four years old.

Long story short: My family's moving day during a sweltering Alabama August. Poor planning, emotions running high, a cat and a dog confined in cardboard boxes with holes for a 6-hour drive. No water for the trip, two carsick animals and a crying mom. We made a pit stop at an aunt's house, and my beautiful cat bolted out of the car and I never saw him again. They all said Tiger had turned "wild" after he escaped, and that always just haunted me.

Not until reaching my thirties have I realized the impact this day has had on me. The memory of my pets' suffering can still be overwhelming, and seeing animals confined in small spaces still deeply distresses me.

But the experience left me with an instinctive desire to help animals, so I faced some of my fears and began volunteering at local shelters for a few weeks at a time cleaning out cat cages. I am not ready to plunge vigorously into any animal cruelty cases or even start my own shelter, and I am still learning where my talents lie and how I can help animals most. A trip to Best Friends last month allowed me to see shelter animals living a good life while waiting for a real home (and of course, I loved the cageless environment).

This topic helps me remember that it isn't my job to judge anyone for not "caring" as much as I do, or even feel guilty when I don't think I'm doing enough. One person may be an activist for animals all over his state, and another may be doing exactly what she needs to do by rescuing one cat and giving her a good home for 15 years. If I go beyond my own means out of guilt instead of genuine desire, then the animals won't benefit as much in the long run. Thanks for the opportunity to share!

## **I can't help it -- I was born this way!**

### **Submission from Linda:**

I think some people are just born with a deep concern and need to help animals. Others come by it through examples or life experiences. I think I was born with a desire to help cats, specifically, and my whole life has been shaped by this need. I'm not always entirely sure that this "need" has been a blessing for me personally!

I remember rescuing my first cat when I was 5 or 6 years old. There was a stream out behind our house, and I saw some older boys back there, mishandling a kitten. They would swing it around by its tail, throw it into the water, and then laugh as it tried to climb out. I told them to stop, and to my complete surprise, they did stop!! I took the kitten, but I was afraid to tell my mother, so I put the kitten under the house and barricaded the opening. Thank goodness, we heard the kitten crying that night and my mother then rescued it from my "shelter". This cat taught me that humans can be cruel, and helpless animals need to be protected by other humans.

When I was around 10, we got a wonderful female dog. She must have had a dozen litters over the years. Back then, in the South, it was rare to spay your dog and the puppies were just handed out to anybody who would take them. I still bear the guilt of that, but I believe she helped me to

understand the necessity for spaying. After her final litter, there was a lot of bleeding. My mother and I took her to the neighborhood vet, who helped her and spayed her. I don't believe he charged us anything, understanding that my mother really couldn't afford to pay. That experience imprinted in my mind the kindness that a veterinarian has the power to bestow.

From then on, my distress at the plight of homeless cats grew until I was obsessed with the need to help them. Eventually, I became a cat veterinarian, thinking I would save all the cats in the world. Well, that hasn't happened yet, but hopefully I have been able to do some good. I think if I had to do it over again, though, I would select a career that would make me a lot of money. Then I could really do some good.

**Submission from Mary:**

I have been doing my best to help with animals since I was very little. I think some of us are born to this.

Whether it is a wild or domestic animal hurt or in trouble, I have never questioned stopping and giving any aid I could. It is my belief that this is why we are on Earth.

I think most sane people would not hesitate to give aid, if they knew what to do.

**Submission from Judy:**

Large, old dogs got me started in rescue work. They were the last at a shelter to be adopted and the first to be put to sleep (PTS). We would get complete veterinary care done, then take them to visit our local care center while waiting for a fur-ever home. Most of the senior dogs are already well trained, well behaved. Our focus is on Senior Pets for Senior Homes, thus it is important that they become familiar with medical equipment. They learn about that while bringing joy to the residents.

Some of my very best volunteers are those with physical or mental challenges that have been turned aside from other volunteer activity, even though it is against the law to do that! It is against Federal law to discriminate because of a handicap! It is also against the law to discriminate because of race, religion, or sex. Americans with Disabilities Act can apply to volunteerism, not just paid positions. I have found these people to be priceless treasures. I would hope every shelter/rescue would look again at offers of help from special needs folks and young people. We MUST get young folks involved with pets today if we want to save the pets of the future.

One especially told me how as soon as she mentioned her medical condition, she was told by another group that they could not use her, since she could not do anything! The woman cried all the way home. She felt so useless! And all she wanted to do was to sit and hold a small dog or puppy. She could not wash, walk, lift heavy things. Yet, there was much she could do.

This volunteer has been terrific to just hold our hospice cases (animals who don't have long to live). She may not be able to lift much weight, stand for long periods of time to wash a dog, or walk a dog, yet she can sit and hold a dog! I am sure there are others in her condition that could be used at a shelter/rescue to just hold a scared small dog, cat, kitten, puppy. Even a large dog would enjoy having a lap to rest his or her head!

## **I found my niche!**

### **Submission from Jeanie:**

My involvement in animal welfare groups began with a life altering event commonly referred to as the 'mid-life crisis'. I prefer to think of it as a 'mid-life awakening'. Entering my forties, my children grown, I began to question what I wanted to do with my life. I asked myself, if I could do anything I wanted, with no limitations, what would that be?

The answer was simple for a life-long animal lover, and with a spiritual philosophy that humans are the keepers of the garden, and all living creatures (and making a terrible mess of it!!!). I knew that animal welfare and taking a stand for their rights was what I wanted to do with the rest of my time here on earth, so I set out to do that.

I first became a volunteer for a wildlife rehabilitation organization in my area, which led to volunteering for a sanctuary for captive and abused wildcats (bred and sold as pets, these wildcats see much abuse and neglect when their owners realize they aren't pets!!!).

This led me to meet a group of women who, like myself, are saddened by the cat overpopulation problem in our area, and the large percentage euthanized at our local shelter. We formed our own non-profit as an alternative for our community, to rescue and adopt cats and kittens, and provide low cost spay/neuter in our area.

My personal goals are twofold, as I have also returned to school to earn a degree in zoology, so I can take my aspirations farther, and do all I can for the creatures of this earth. It is a spiritual journey, as well--I have always had a more powerful experience spiritually when I am with animals

then any form of worship I have attended. I am dedicated to spend my life doing all I can for their welfare.

**Submission from Jude:**

One day, a coworker came to work with six puppies in the trunk of his car that he had just then found in a field. One worker took one puppy, another took two, another worker later took in one, and we fostered two. Later, there was a rescue group outside our vet clinic and we talked to them and ended up agreeing to foster one dog. Eventually, we took in a few more dogs.

Overall, we ended up fostering over 240 dogs! Doing just one dog at a time, it makes it easy to find just the right home for them.

People often ask how you can let go of them. I always say that a great home that is focused on that dog is better than them being one of our pack. I follow up on all of our rescues and the adopters always know they should return them to us if there is a problem, so I don't worry so much. We have not had a return yet.

**Submission from Lou:**

Well, I guess you could say I was dragged, kicking and screaming. A few years ago our local authorities found that a dog owner had abandoned 36 Siberian huskies. The Siberian folks had known for a while that this person was a "collector" and kept the dogs in awful conditions, but there was not sufficient legal evidence to raid her. When she abandoned the dogs (18 indoors, and 18 outdoors) that gave the county sufficient cause to confiscate them. Her dogs were frequent winners in the show ring, and to this day, some folks argue that she was totally misused.

The dogs were taken to our local SPCA and my friend dragged me down to the SPCA to help. Of course, some of the dogs died, some had to be put down, and we rescued many. Despite the horrendous conditions they were found in, for the most part, they were gentle and loving. I was hooked, and have been involved ever since.

**Submission from Sharon:**

Thank you for the chance to write, everyone's stories are wonderful! Sadly, while growing up I was very indifferent to animals.

It was my first dog that changed my life 13 years ago. She came from a shelter at 6 months old and we became so close I began to feel everything she felt, and I know she did the same for me. We all know the strength of the bonds we form with our pets, and the heart-wrenching sadness

when we have to say goodbye. We said goodbye last October and though it still hurts there is good from it. She has taught me compassion and sensitivity for animals, and given me a desire to contribute something worthwhile to them.

Now I study to complete a vet assistant course, hopefully by the end of the summer. My goal is to work in or create a low-cost spay/neuter clinic, maybe even a mobile unit. I have also just adopted another shelter dog; when I look in his face I see all the others left at the shelter. That's enough to keep anyone going!

PS: If anyone in my area (Northeast PA) wants to email me regarding spay/neuter, please do, at navyblue1130@yahoo.com!

## **Education leads to action!**

### **Submission from Judith:**

I had come to a point in my life where I wanted to 'give back' in some way. I was searching for a place for myself, some way I could make a difference.... At the same time, I was considering getting a new pet as a companion for our gentle dog, and we thought of a rabbit. I had rabbits as a kid; I was raised in a farm environment and had them in hutches outdoors. So, my husband and I roamed the local pet stores, looking at cute little lop babies, yet something held me back. I wasn't quite ready.

One day I stopped off at the local pet supply store to get dog food. As usual, I poked my head into their cat adoption area, only to come upon two rabbits. One of them, a beautiful pure, white bunny girl beckoned me forward. I had a life-changing experience in that one instant. After stroking her nose, having her lick me and tooth purr, I knew she was the 'one.' I came back to the store the next day and adopted my beautiful bunny girl, Skye, who had been thrown from a second floor and was blind in one eye.

Among the adoption paperwork was a booklet titled, "A Rabbit in the House - Now What?" This booklet, written by the House Rabbit Society's (HRS) San Diego Chapter, changed my life. I read it cover to cover, and it opened up a whole new world for me. Gone was the idea of the outdoor hutch, replaced with the excitement of bunny living indoors. There was so much there I never knew about rabbits, even after having them as pets for most of my childhood.

When I reached the end of that booklet I knew where I was needed. I contacted HRS the next day and offered my volunteer services, never looking back. Today, five years later, I am so proud to be a member of the board and one of my chapter's leaders. I'm a foster home, a licensed educator, I manage the chapter's web site (<http://www.rabbit.org/chapters/san-diego/>), and more. HRS is truly my life's work and I've found my means of "giving back and making a difference in my world."

**Submission from Bruce:**

My rescue experience started late in life. My wife and I were without a pet for about 15 years, after the death of our beloved Siamese, Junior, in 1987. My wife had been trying to get me to agree to adopt a kitten or puppy (Her first choice was a puppy, but I have been a cat person for a long time.). I finally started to use the internet to research the availability of pets and was amazed/shocked at what I found. This started a rapid journey which got me involved in cat/kitten rescue barely a year later.

I first joined a Yahoo! Rescue Group and started to network with various rescue groups in my area. I decided to act as a go-between with couple of kill shelters and to arrange the rescue and transport of cats and kittens from the shelters to licensed rescues.

This entire process evolved over a very short period of time and made it possible to rescue over 100 cats/kittens from certain death, to rescues where they would get a good home.

I long for the day when I can really make a difference in this endeavor. I truly believe this is my calling and why God put me on this earth. By networking with like-minded people, it really is possible to save many homeless pets who would otherwise face a very short life. There is so much work to be done. Thank you, Best Friends, for being a beacon in the dark and spreading the word.

**Submission from C.:**

As one of seven children, we always had dogs. Unfortunately in those days (late 1950's thru 1960's), spay and neuter surgeries and most vet services were out of reach so my family and I certainly added to the pet overpopulation problem. When I was ten, we tried to adopt from our local SPCA, but we were turned down (too many kids? too poor?). We always had mutts ("Look what followed me home, ma!") but I longed for the day I would have my own purebred dog, constantly dreaming of Lassie and Rin Tin Tin.

Shortly after I married and moved out, I convinced my husband that we absolutely needed a purebred German Shepherd and paid \$125.00 (an unbelievable amount of money to poor

newlyweds) for my beloved Brunie. I was bitten by the dog show bug and enjoyed the camaraderie of other dog lovers.

But, I started seeing many dog show people as glory hungry. If the dog didn't win, they got rid of the dog. And if expenses got too high, they would have a "money litter." So many of these show people weren't in it for the "betterment of the breed", they were in it only for themselves. It broke my heart!!

By this time, I had a dog grooming shop (I just had to be involved with animals, I loved them so much!). About that time, the newspaper ran a series of articles about some "nuts" (hey, I don't think that way any more!) who were protesting the conditions of our local pound. The government promised to hire an on-site manager to better supervise the employees. There were quite a few applicants with shelter experience that applied. But apparently, I was the only one that would accept the pitiful salary they offered (thank you, my hard-working hubby).

So, I found my calling (and my cause) and have been giving--literally--my blood, sweat and tears for seventeen years! I often wonder if my family and I had been given a different reception at the SPCA all those years ago, maybe I would have fallen into volunteering and found animal sheltering a lot sooner in my life!

## **And then one day, something clicked...**

### **Submission from Janelle:**

I was leafing through a magazine that had an ad in the back that caught my eye. It had a photo showing two chickens and some sort of cement walkway. I looked closer. The heading over the photo said, Walking to Freedom.

I wondered, what does that mean? I read the smaller print below the photo, and it said, "These two chickens have just been let out of their battery cages, free for the first time in their lives. They will now live at our chicken sanctuary, free to roam the grounds, scratch and peck in the dirt, and roost in the trees."

I thought, what are battery cages? I looked at the photo again and saw some iron bars, probably the edge of the cage. I looked at the chickens more closely and saw that they looked very haggard and sick, with many feathers rubbed away, combs limp, eyes glazed, and their beaks clipped off at the ends.

This was my introduction to what conditions are like for chickens that are kept in "factory farms." I learned that they are treated like some lifeless piece of machinery. I was to learn a lot that saddened me very much. But I was glad to have learned it and have ever since been an annual donor to the organization that placed that ad in the magazine, a sanctuary called United Poultry Concerns (<http://www.upc-online.org/>) in Machipongo, Virginia. Not only that, but I gave up eating eggs from that moment on. I was determined not to be a contributor to that sort of misery, just for the sake of eating eggs that I'm healthier without anyway.

Learning about chicken factory farms opened up my eyes to all sorts of animal abuse going on around me. I became an animal activist, joining a local animal rights group in my area, and donating money every month to various animal organizations. All of this has enriched my life greatly.

**Submission from Nora:**

I cannot recall what inspired me to go to my local SPCA orientation, but I was hooked from that moment on. I have since been a volunteer for 4 years.

I cannot imagine my life without volunteering and feel a great sense of pride every time I am there. There is nothing more gratifying than watching these poor, scared animals blossom into happy, confident ones. I have learned that there is a home for each and every one of them. Some just take a bit longer than others.

**Submission from Barbara:**

The most difficult decision of my adult life was to look at the situation at our local animal control, and eventually volunteer there. I had a haunted feeling about the reality of the situation there, fueled by the stories I'd heard. I'd drive miles out of the way rather than drive by the building.

When I finally asked for and got the euthanasia statistics, I had a moment of pain that literally brought me to my knees. I'm not a religious person, but I told God, or Mother Nature, or whatever is out there that I would deal with the pain if I could know that I could make a difference.

Two years later, I am on the Animal Control Board and spend almost every Saturday working in adoption at the shelter. I have a cordial relationship with our Animal Services Director despite the fact that I very vocally support TNR (I am the coordinator for a statewide coalition that came together after the May 2003 Florida Fish & Wildlife feral cat policy decision) and he is very vocally opposed to TNR.

I still have many, many days when I feel as though the situation is hopeless and that I can't handle the sadness for the animals that have been euthanized, or the attitude from some that feral cats are somehow as disposable as garbage, but none of that compares to the nagging feeling I carried before I got involved.

I should also say that I've found the shelter workers to be true animal lovers and unbelievably dedicated. Some are jaded by the throw away attitude of some of the public but I think asking them to be more open minded and diplomatic would be unrealistic until their workload is eased. They're operating with the same number of staff as 15 years ago, and the kennel workers each feed and clean up after 75 animals each along with working in adoption. I compare that to working in sales for a hotel and having to clean 50 rooms before going out and making sales calls!

## **Influential people made all the difference**

### **Submission from Kim:**

I got started volunteering in a no-kill rescue group because of a very close friend--but not for the usual reasons! Having always been an animal lover, my idea of working though any dog related problems and her idea did not match.

On Christmas Eve, about 6 years ago, she told me that she had taken her dog to the kill pound. That was enough for me.

About 2 months later, I started with the no kill group, dropped her as a friend and never looked back. I find this work to be very satisfying, and very frustrating at the same time, but I love it.

### **Submission from Barbara:**

I was always the child that brought the baby bird home, or the abandoned cat. I had the good fortune of being the daughter of an animal activist. I can remember my mother working in the 1960's to outlaw the hunting of wild horses. When my grade school put out poison as a way of dealing with pigeons, my mother was the only adult to sign my petition opposing that action. Whatever other problems we had (and we had lots) we were always linked by our love of animals.

### **Submission from Tara:**

My mom was always one to take in ANY stray that came to our door or that we brought home from school. We never had much money but no animal would go hungry at our house! I guess that really sunk in for me. I just take in those that have nowhere else to go.

## Desire to solve a problem

### **Submission from Sonja:**

My philosophy is simple. If I see something that is wrong, I don't just complain. I try to fix it.

### **Submission from Matti:**

My husband and I got into shelter/rescue in December 2001 after complaining to the city about horrid conditions at the municipal shelter and most of all....the city's method of euthanasia, which involved an old police car hooked up to an old fire hose running into a nasty little homemade cement block chamber.

We realized that in order to change the system, we had to do more than just complain, which led us to begin foster for the shelter, provide food for the 'incarcerated' darlings. We also provided bedding, litter, and new crates for the cats to get them out of the rabbit cages with those horrible wire floors.

I am happy to report that the method of euthanasia has been changed to lethal injection, but unfortunately we were labeled as "radical agitators" and not allowed to visit the shelter after someone sabotaged the police car.

Because ours is a "mission of the heart," we now operate a home-based rescue/sanctuary. We remain small, but have been able to effect change and create awareness of the importance of spay/neuter in our community. There is still a rough road ahead as we try to educate the people in our area in order to change the mindset regarding companion animals as disposable property. We often challenge the "man having dominion over the animals" philosophy and what it means. To us, it means we are responsible for the health and welfare of these special angels.

### **Submission from Terri:**

The local tribal rangers were collecting stray dogs and penning them in the heat and blazing sun, with no shade and minimal water and then when enough had piled up, they would shoot them. The cats they would shoot in their traps. This became public knowledge and through bad publicity for the tribe, a shelter was built to provide protection for the animals. I went there on grand opening day and signed on as a volunteer.

The volunteer group was not wanted as we were seen as buttinskis but we pressed on. We cleaned and medicated and paid our own money to get animals to the vet. The tribe had the shelter but we still didn't see that they cared about the animals. Money set aside for the animals in

the volunteer fund was being embezzled and so the volunteers decided to get a 501(c)3 and become nonprofit so we could raise and handle our own money.

Eventually the group leader left and I stepped up and I've been doing it ever since. It's been six years now. We hold adoptions for the shelter and try to get their pets adopted but our other contact with them is minimal.

## Out of the ashes, new life rises up

### **Submission from Patricia:**

There wasn't a defining moment for me; I've been rescuing and trying to save animals since I was a young child.

My first tragedy with an animal was when I had to give up some kittens to the local shelter because we could not afford to keep them. I was 10 years old at the time. We were so poor, most of the time we didn't have food to eat. So to be humane my mom would send all the animals I brought home to the local shelter. The tragedy was when I turned over Nicholas and Samantha to the shelter and they killed them in the truck before they even arrived at the shelter. That's what they use to do 40 years ago in my city. Now this would never happen. When I learned they had killed my kittens I sat down and wrote a 6 page letter to the local TV action reporter. I told him about the conditions at the shelter and how they had killed my two beautiful, healthy kittens for no reason. Much to my surprise, he featured my letter and did a story on the shelter and that started the wheels turning in getting conditions improved at the shelter and policies changed regarding euthanizing animals in the truck.

I've never forgotten those babies. I'm 50 years old and still have their little flea collars taped in my scrap book.

Over the years I didn't really take part in any type of consistent rescue of animals, but always picked up strays when I came across them on the street. It wasn't until I was much older that I decided this is what I wanted to do full time. My compassion for animals just grew more and more as time went on and I realized rescuing was my true calling. Thanks for allowing me the opportunity to share with you.

### **Submission from Rebecca:**

It goes without saying that I had always had love for animals. What galvanized me to transform that global passion into specific action was the loss of my dear companion cat of seventeen years.

I had found Twinkie as a tiny, somewhat ugly, stray kitten. When Twinkie died I was inconsolable. I missed him so much, he had been such a fine cat. I kept thinking that I would have done anything to help Twinkie but there was nothing I could do.

Then I started thinking about all those unwanted animals languishing in the local shelters, so much could be done to help them and needed to be done. At that time, over ten years ago, I started volunteering my time and money (and heart) to local shelters and rescue groups. My husband and I have fostered an assortment of dogs as well as approximately six hundred cats/kittens since then.

I take great satisfaction that we have been able to be instrumental in helping these deserving creatures to find a better life than what they came from. To me this is Twinkie's legacy, for he was truly a fine friend who will be remembered for all time.

**Submission from Sharri:**

Some love stories have unusual matchmakers: we met through our cats. I would greet his cats each morning and evening as I traveled back and forth from our apartment building. He would leave out a bowl of food for my one adventurous cat. I took to carrying cat treats in my briefcase to lure his felines--and I waved to the Handsome Hermit through the window. I bestowed the bribes to his feline children...hoping to gain his attention and affection. The plan was a success after a year of platonic friendship based initially upon our mutual love of cats.

We commingled our households of seven, sometimes hissing, magical felines and one confused, small canine. We said the marital vows, and for nearly ten years shared the joys of marriage and friendship...always with a furry one or two on his lap. This man filled my life.

When I came home that day to find the lifeless body of my beloved husband -- something broke forever. A part of me cracked permanently, a broken vessel, a broken spirit...and in the remaining gap there left a place to heal. The healing heart sometimes can bring great renewal to others. The circumstances which followed that horrible, life-altering tragedy have created a new, stronger me--with a mission of healing and saving those voiceless creatures that I love, that I have adored since childhood. Those dogs and cats that I cherish, and that my Handsome Hermit also loved.

That was seven years and several hundred dogs and cats ago...

**Submission from Alicia:**

I've always loved animals and have always brought home strays, found hurt or abandoned wild animals, etc. but what cemented the compulsion came after I lost my husband. I fell into a deep

depression and would not have gotten out of bed if not for my animals. I had to get up and take care of them. If I hadn't had that reason to live, I doubt I would've. They literally saved my life.

My first foster was a husky that wasn't expected to live. She had given up on life and wouldn't eat. But, she lived and thrived with me. After she found a forever home (although I cried a lot), I got another neglected foster. Finally, the epiphany of, "Aaahh, this is why I'm here."

## A few more unique stories

### **Submission from Seda:**

Being from another country, I did not grow up with cats or dogs, and my family did not teach me any love or respect for animals. People from my country believed that (they still do) cats and dogs belonged on the streets. So, I do not know where my love for animals come from. None of my relatives are like me. Actually, although animal lovers are minorities almost everywhere, I can say that I am an extremely 'rare breed' among my people :)

During the last summer of my college year, I became close with a friend who was helping the stray cats and dogs, and started helping her. I offered to take 4 kittens she had. 2 of those kittens died, I found more kittens, and they all died since I, my friend and the vets did not know much about taking care of pets. (Most of the vets over there are 30-40 years behind the current veterinary knowledge). I and one of my close friends have the surviving 2 kittens, who are now 7-year-old cats.

We brought our cat with us when we moved to the USA 6 years ago. Whenever we went to Petco, there was always some rescue group with cats or dogs, and I never wanted to leave Petco. I learned about fostering, and figured out that was the only way I could live with lots of cats without any commitment that my husband was against. So, I started fostering 3 years ago. During this time, I have fostered close to 150 kittens.

For the last 4 years, now the cats and dogs are becoming more common in my country. But as I said before, the veterinary medicine is still far behind. So, in order to help these new pet owners, I wanted to share everything that I have learned, on a web site that I found while surfing the web. I started answering cat related questions on this web site 4 years ago, and 2 years ago switched to writing a column about cat related issues.

When I tell about all the animals and fosters that I have/had, to someone from my country, almost everyone thinks that I must be having some kind of a psychological problem! However, all the Americans compliment and say nice things to me...

**Submission from Mary:**

I have loved animals, especially dogs, since I was very small. We couldn't have pets (my parents thought 6 children in a Brooklyn, NY apartment were enough "pets"). So I used to pet all the dogs in the neighborhood when they were on walks and when I got a little older started walking them for neighbors who needed it.

I grew up and became a legal secretary, but as the years went by and my children got a little older, I realized that my passion for dogs wasn't just some aberration, in a way it was a "gift." And I felt I needed to start using it. I had my own dogs at this point, but I wanted to do more, so I began to volunteer at our local shelter. I walked dogs, sat with scared dogs to calm them, socialized the timid, collected towels and newspapers for the shelter, crocheted cat blankets for the cat cages.

That led to attending adoption events with our mobile unit, fostering dogs in my home and eventually I got asked to join the Special Events Committee, which plans our big fundraisers. It has been very satisfying, but what I still enjoy the most is the one-one-one with the dogs. I have five dogs of my own now, all rescues. My family didn't think I'd take them at their word when they said when I grew up and had my own house, I could have as many dogs as I wanted!

**Submission from Rebecca:**

It started with guilt. I realized that my lovely, loving Chow Chow had not received the best possible care by his person, me. I just started to devote time, energy and thoughts to animals and their safety. I volunteered at the shelter, but realized that I was not sleeping and losing hair. It was so destroying to see the poor animals stuck in small cages everyday, and then to go home to two dogs who are so loved and cared for at night...I couldn't handle it.

So, now I just find animals in bad situations and try my best to save them. I sleep better at night knowing that one more animal is okay. My goal is to open a Pet Saver Shelter, where the animals can be more free. Thank you so much – for everything you and the whole team does...Wow!

**Submission from Suzette:**

I've been gathering critters as long as I can remember, and as long as anyone in my family can recall. I believe what the Bible says, the animals were placed in our care and keeping.

I've also heard it said, "You can't save them all." It's a true statement, but as I look at the puppy, or kitten, or cat, or dog, or whatever creature it is, I smile and say: "That's true, but I can save THIS one." Really, many times that is the best we can do. We can make a difference for the ones right in front of us.

I have found countless animals homes thought the years, and I have many happy stories. I know there will be many more animals in my future, and they will be taken in. Happiness or heartbreak, I hope I can save THIS one.

### **Closing comments from forum moderator:**

Thank you to the many members who shared their fascinating stories during this week's forum!

Transcripts from this and all other forum weeks, are archived for easy reference, and are made available to all at

<http://www.bestfriends.com/nomorehomelesspets/weeklyforum/forumarchives.cfm>.

Frequently, members contact us asking for permission to share the information posted through this forum. The answer is always yes. We just ask that the source is acknowledged (No More Homeless Pets online forum, hosted by Best Friends Animal Society) and that the web page for the forum is provided (<http://www.bestfriends.com/nomorehomelesspets/weeklyforum/>). That way they know where to go to find out more!

Meanwhile, those of you who joined the forum midweek can view the complete transcripts right away at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/NMHP/>.

As always, thank you for being part of the forum, and for everything you do for the animals!

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***Kindness to animals builds a better world for all of us.***