

In the Home Stretch

The future of the No More Homeless Pets movement



By Sandy Miller

In the summer of 1984, the founders of Best Friends Animal Society broke ground in southern Utah on what would become the nation's largest sanctuary for abandoned and abused animals. And so began the No More Homeless Pets movement.

Back then, around 17 million animals were being killed in shelters every year. The conventional wisdom was that it was a necessary evil – that it was kind to kill. Best Friends and the No More Homeless Pets movement challenged that conventional wisdom.

“Killing homeless pets wasn't a necessary evil, it was just plain evil and it needed to end,” Julie Castle (*above*), director of Best Friends' Community Programs and Services, told the audience at last October's

No More Homeless Pets Conference in Las Vegas. “It was a watershed time and it was a game changer.”

The No More Homeless Pets movement has come a long way in the last 25 years. “Super-adoption” events, low-cost spay/neuter clinics and other innovative programs have made a big dent in euthanasia rates, bringing them down to roughly 5 million today. But that's still 5 million too many.

The No More Homeless Pets movement is very much a social movement, and right now it's at the 24th mile of a 26-mile marathon. It has come a long way and there have been many successes. But there are two more miles to go: the hardest miles.

Castle, a runner herself, knows very well what those last couple miles of a marathon feel like. “It's all you can do to get to 24 miles and then all of your resources are gone, the tank is empty,” Castle told the conference audience. “The first time you hit that wall, you feel like you're going to die. There is nothing to do but put one foot in front of the other and not quit. It is a matter of total commitment.”

The No More Homeless Pets movement, Castle said, is at that 24-mile mark, and it will take an act of collective will to get to the finish line, and realize the dream of no more homeless pets.

Narrowing the focus

Super-adoption events and low-cost, high-volume spay/neuter programs are still very important building blocks of the No More Homeless Pets movement, but they reach what Castle calls the “low-hanging fruit.” Now the movement must reach higher into the tree if it is going to break through that euthanasia total of 5 million per year, which hasn't budged for five years. “We're really going to need to get deep, to get creative,” Castle says.

Best Friends has identified that the majority of animals being killed in shelters fall into four categories: cats; bully breeds (which includes pit bulls and pit-bull-type dogs); the results of exploitive breeders, including puppy mills; and owner-relinquished pets.

Those are areas in which Best Friends is focusing its campaigns in the hope of breaking through that 5 million plateau, and workshops at October's No More Homeless Pets Conference addressed these areas. But the conference didn't just examine what's wrong; it also looked at programs that are doing it right.

A record 650 people attended the conference in Las Vegas, about twice the number who attended the previous No More Homeless Pets Conference back in April 2005 in Portland, Oregon. Eighty-five percent of them had never been to a No More Homeless Pets conference before, and 69 percent had never been to an animal welfare conference of any kind. And one-third of the attendees were not affiliated with any animal welfare group. “That tells me this is a mainstream issue,” Castle says.

Keeping cats out of shelters

While 30 to 40 percent of dogs who enter shelters are returned to their people, only 2 percent of cats ever find their way home again. Cats react to new and frightening situations very differently than dogs do; that difference can often cost them their lives in shelter situations. Many cats entering shelters are so traumatized that they're quickly deemed feral or unsocialized. Labeled unadoptable, they're usually euthanized.

So, the first step is to keep cats from ending up in a shelter in the first place. The groundbreaking program called Feral Freedom in Jacksonville, Florida, is doing just that. The program, which Best Friends is helping to fund, relies on close cooperation between the city of Jacksonville and a local spay/neuter organization called First Coast No More Homeless Pets to control cat overpopulation. It's truly a community effort. In fact, the cats aren't called "feral cats"; they're referred to as "community cats."

When animal control receives a call about community cats, the cats are humanely trapped and turned over to First Coast No More Homeless Pets, where they're spayed or neutered and then returned to their natural habitat. These cats never set foot inside an animal shelter.

Rick DuCharme, a former heavy equipment salesman who founded First Coast No More Homeless Pets seven years ago, says the partnership with the city is a dream come true. "When you work with the shelter, you find a way to save animals that just a short time ago you thought there was no way of saving," DuCharme says.

In New York City, feral cat caregivers keep track of the cats in their colonies via the New York City Feral Cat Database, a project launched by the New York City Feral Cat Council, a program of the Mayor's Alliance for NYC's Animals. In the shared database, caregivers record how many cats have been altered and how their cat numbers have changed over time. The database helps get feral cats who end up in shelters back to their colonies. Thanks to the database, only one ear-tipped cat has been euthanized at New York City Animal Control in several years, and that was due to illness.

The hope is that other communities will adopt successful programs such as the ones in Jacksonville and New York City. If they do, fewer cats will end up in shelters and more cats will find their way home again.

A beleaguered breed

It's not a good time to be a pit bull or pit-bull mix, or any other dog who just happens to look like one of the bully breeds. Thanks to widespread myths, unfair stereotyping and misinformed media hype, the bully breeds, who years ago were America's most beloved dogs, have now become the outcasts of society. Indeed, many communities have banished them altogether. "The terrier alert is up to orange," says Ledy Van Kavage, an attorney and senior legislative analyst for Best Friends.

These dogs are often deemed unadoptable – an automatic death sentence at most shelters. In many shelters, bully breeds make up the majority of dogs being killed, not because of anything they've done, but simply because of what they look like. "You guys are what we're going to need to save our dogs," Van Kavage told attendees at one of the No More Homeless Pets Conference's workshops.

One of the first steps is to get these dogs out of shelters. There are some wonderful people out there working toward that goal. People like Lori Weise, who founded Downtown Dog Rescue in

Los Angeles in 1996 after noticing that homeless people on skid row had no resources to help them care for their dogs. A dozen years later, her all-volunteer, nonprofit organization has rescued, rehabilitated and adopted out more than 2,500 dogs, mostly pit bulls who otherwise wouldn't have had a chance.

In addition to helping homeless people with dogs, the organization offers everything from free dog food to free spay/neuter services to training for low-income pet owners in south-central Los Angeles, Watts and Compton, helping families to keep their pets. Weise also rescues pit bulls from shelters who would otherwise be euthanized, and operates a kennel in downtown Los Angeles, where she socializes the dogs before finding homes for them.

One of the biggest components of her program is educating the public. "We've got to get out of ourselves and into the communities where the problems are," Weise says.

Many of the dogs in the areas Downtown Dog Rescue serves have been abused and kept on chains. Weise and her organization are trying to change that. She says, "We're trying to make the dog a part of the family instead of throwing it into the backyard."

Likewise, education and community involvement are the nuts and bolts of Safe Humane Chicago, a unique grassroots campaign aimed at stopping violence directed at children and companion animals in Chicago. Best Friends is a national partner and supporter of the program.

Safe Humane Chicago involves the entire community, including social service agencies, government entities, schools, churches, police and the courts. The program teaches children about the importance of kindness to animals and steers teenagers away from the world of dog fighting. Young people mentor their younger peers about why dog fighting and animal abuse are bad. Adults learn why they should take dog fighting and animal abuse seriously if they want to protect their children from violence and make their neighborhoods safer. Participants work with government agencies to provide training and appropriate interventions for situations involving animal neglect, abuse and fighting.

"You just have to build relationships," says Cynthia Bathurst, Best Friends' national director of Project Safe Humane.

When it comes to saving the bully breeds, people need to get involved, Van Kavage says. They need to lobby to pass laws that prohibit canine profiling. They need to start blogs and write letters to the editors of their newspapers. They might also consider running for office themselves. "If we want to save these dogs, we really need to become politically active," Van Kavage says.

Puppies aren't products

Nationwide, 25 percent of dogs in shelters are purebreds. At the same time, virtually all puppies sold in stores come from puppy mills and backyard breeders, and they're breeding faster than the animal welfare community can find homes for dogs.

When it comes to shutting down these substandard breeding operations, it's all about awareness, says Kelli Ohrtman, Best Friends' campaign specialist on puppy mills. Best Friends and other organizations have managed to shut down some of these mills and bring media attention to the problem. Oprah Winfrey's show on puppy mills reached millions of viewers. When people find out where puppies sold in pet stores really come from, and how these puppies' parents are living horrible lives in small, dirty cages to increase profits for the breeders and pet stores, they often reconsider buying a puppy from

Continued on page 48

Continued from page 17

a pet store or off the Internet. “Keeping a dog in a small cage for her entire life is unacceptable to pet owners whose dogs live with them as family companions,” Ohrtman says.

The way to shut down these operations for good is to take away the profit motive. If people stop buying puppies from pet stores or the Internet, the puppy mill owners will have no incentive to continue operating. “These dogs are the blood diamonds of animal welfare,” Castle says.

Ohrtman encourages animal welfare advocates to lobby their lawmakers to pass stronger laws regulating commercial breeding operations, and to assist their local animal control agencies and county officials in putting the squeeze on local exploitive breeders and pet stores that are adding to the burden of local shelters. And they must continue to educate the public about the connection between puppy mills and pet store and Internet sales.

Raising awareness is an important part of Best Friends’ Puppies Aren’t Products campaign. One of the campaign’s programs is A Puppy-Store-Free L.A., which includes conducting peaceful protests outside of stores that sell puppy mill dogs and educating potential customers about where these dogs come from.

“It helps people understand the connection between puppies they see in the pet stores and the cruel and inhumane conditions under which they are bred in these puppy mills,” says Elizabeth Oreck, manager of Best Friends’ Los Angeles programs. People are listening, and several pet stores have closed their doors since the program began in the summer of 2008.

Another Best Friends program is Pup My Ride, which rescues small, purebred dogs from the Los Angeles County shelter system and transports them to cities that don’t have enough of these dogs to meet public demand. Thanks to the program, hundreds of dogs have found their way out of shelters and into loving homes.

Home sweet home

Before becoming Best Friends’ director of Community Programs and Services in 2007, Castle spent seven years with No More Homeless Pets in Utah. During those seven years, she saw a lot of progress: Adoption numbers and spay/neuter rates grew steadily and euthanasia rates declined. But she noticed that shelter surrender numbers hardly changed.

“That was a light-bulb moment for me,” Castle says. “I knew we couldn’t adopt and spay/neuter ourselves out of this problem. It told me that this was a societal issue. Until we elevate the status of pets in society as part of the family, we’re still going to be euthanizing animals in shelters.”

Spreading the message that pets are part of the family is the goal of Best Friends’ First Home, Forever Home campaign, aimed at changing the behavior that allows casual pet surrender to be acceptable. The campaign encourages people to microchip their pets, to help pets find their way home again if they land in shelters, and educates people about how to manage their pets’ behavior problems so they can keep them in the family.

Of the millions of animals going into shelters each year, many are

pets whose people are facing difficult times and are at a loss about what to do with their pets. Perhaps they’ve been stricken with a major illness, or they’re losing their home, or their pet has a physical or behavioral challenge they don’t think they can deal with. But what if shelters had resources to help these people keep their pets?

Nathan Winograd, director of the No Kill Advocacy Center in Oakland, California, says when it comes to animal control, the problem is not too many animals, but the lack of lifesaving programs. Shelters must have some key components in place if they want to become no-kill facilities – things that make up what Winograd calls the No Kill Equation.

One of those components is a pet retention program aimed at helping people keep their companion animals. To do this, shelters must be willing to work with people to help them solve their pet problems, and communities must develop innovative strategies for keeping people and their companion animals together. Animal control agencies can maintain libraries of pet care and behavior resources in their shelters and on their websites. Articles in local papers and spots on radio and television can feature topics like how to solve litter box avoidance and curb excessive barking. Other pet retention strategies include free in-home dog-behavior problem-solving by volunteers, low-cost dog training and pet-friendly rental programs.

The last two miles

It was just 14 minutes into the first women’s Olympic marathon in 1984 when American Joan Benoit began to pull away from the pack. She breezed over the finish line with a time of 2 hours, 24 minutes, and 52 seconds, securing the gold medal.

But it was a 39-year-old Idaho ski instructor named Gabriela Andersen-Schiess, representing her native Switzerland, who captured the audience’s hearts. Twenty minutes after Benoit crossed the finish line, Andersen-Schiess staggered into the stadium, coming in 37th. Castle included a video of Andersen-Schiess’ emotional finish during her closing remarks at October’s conference. Her final lap around the track was a perfect example of total commitment.

Like Andersen-Schiess, the No More Homeless Pets movement has come too far to give up now. The final couple of miles will be all about putting one foot in front of the other.

“Folks, are you ready for total commitment? Are you with us?” Castle asked the audience at the conference. The convention hall rocked with applause.

With their enthusiasm and commitment, they could very well envision, in their lifetimes, a day when every life has value, a day when every life is worth saving, a day when they live in a nation where there are no more homeless pets. 🐾

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For more about the No More Homeless Pets movement, go to:

network.bestfriends.org/nmhp

Read more about the No Kill Advocacy Center’s No Kill Equation at:

www.nokilladvocacycenter.org

