

Homes for the Holidays

Challenging accepted wisdom, the nation's top adoption expert says that shelters should hold adoption drives during the holiday season.

► **By Carolyn Mitchell**

Mike Arms played Santa Claus to hundreds of shelter animals in San Diego County last year, and the executive director of the Helen Woodward Animal Center hopes to spread holiday cheer for even more orphaned pets this season.

More than 2,500 animals found themselves enjoying doggy chews and catnip toys in the glow of their own hearths last Christmas, as a result of Arms' Home for the Holidays, an adoption drive that succeeded by uniting all the shelters in a concerted effort and attracting lavish media attention.

"The key to the success of Home for the Holidays was not working *against* human nature but working *with* it," Arms says. "So many children want a pet as a holiday gift, and if a puppy or a kitten is on their wish list, we don't want the family filling the wish by buying a pet from a pet store or puppy mill."

The humane community has traditionally opposed giving animals as gifts. The assumption was that the recipient wouldn't want the animal or wouldn't take care of it properly or would tire of it when it started to grow up.

But recent studies have shown that none of this is actually true. And Arms argues that since parents will persist in giving animals as presents anyway, animal shelters can help ensure that the gift will be a good match. Pet stores, after all, simply want to make a sale. So the shelters should offer their dogs and cats to holiday shoppers and help make the adoption successful by mandating spay/neuters, carefully screening adopters, and counseling them about the needs of pets.

Arms, who spearheaded adoptions at the North Shore Animal League in New York and created its national Adopt-a-Thon program before moving to the West Coast, relied on his prestige, vigor, and persistence to enlist all the San Diego shelters in the Home for the Holidays campaign last year.

Shelters cut adoption fees, extended operating hours, and offered other incentives to find homes for their furry residents. "We were all working together," Arms says. "We had a list of the shelters on flyers. If somebody didn't see the right pet at our facility, we gave them the flyer and suggested they visit another shelter."

As important as any of the campaign strategies was publicity. "We made the media our partners," Arms says. "We kept them informed on the adoptions. We called every week with the tally of adoptions. And we didn't forget to thank them and to praise them for the role they played in helping our animals."

Thanksgiving to New Year's is a slow news period, heartwarming feature stories are in demand, and the public is highly susceptible to do-good endeavors – all of which worked to the benefit of the campaign.

And Arms was always ready with a quote that might mist the eyes of Ebenezer Scrooge.

"Nobody wants to think about an orphaned dog or cat sitting alone in a kennel on Thanksgiving morning," he said, announcing last year's campaign. "With this plan, we can work together to find permanent homes during this time of year when we all focus on the importance of family."

Between November 15 and December 31, 1999, 1,512 dogs and 1,051 cats were adopted from 14 San Diego shelters.

The San Diego Department of Animal Control completed 1,065 adoptions, a seven percent increase over the same period in 1998. The Helen Woodward Center reported new highs for single-day adoptions, weekend adoptions, and the most adoptions in a single week since the center opened in 1972.

"Not one animal was returned to Helen Woodward and I didn't hear of an increase in adoption returns to any of the other participating facilities," Arms says.

This year, Home for the Holidays will expand into all of California and four more states: Utah, New Mexico, Texas, and Washington. "We'll have around 300 shelters in this year's drive, and we're projecting we'll do 10,000 to 15,000 adoptions," he says.

The IAMS pet food company will sponsor the 2000 campaign, providing starter kits of treats and toys. "Each adopted pet will go to its new home with its own holiday meals and gifts," Arms continues.

Participating shelters will receive model news releases and suggestions for attracting coverage. "You have to let the public know that you have these orphans and that they're going to spend the holidays in cages if people don't adopt them," Arms says.

"Home for the Holidays goes to show what we can accomplish when we all work together to enhance the quality of life for our animal orphans." 🐾

If your shelter is in California, Utah, New Mexico, Texas, or Washington and you'd like to participate in Home for the Holidays this season, contact Mike Arms at mikea@animalcenter.org. You can also email him if you're in another state and you'd like to take part next year.



Mike Arms, with Helen Woodward supporter Cathie Cerreta, cat McKenna, and public relations manager John Van Zante