

The Chess Master

► **By Estelle Munro**

Anyone who has spent years working in animal rescue programs can tell you that there's never a shortage of eagerness and idealism.

But for the campaign to succeed, eagerness and idealism need a business plan, too.

Enter Dennis Stearns. His plan for No More Homeless Pets in Guilford County, North Carolina, is a masterpiece of planning.

Stearns not only runs his own financial services group, he organizes major business and management conferences, sits on the board of several charities, and played on the most successful Pan-American chess team in U.S. history.

Now he's turning his skills to helping the homeless pets of his home town, Greensboro, and its surrounding county, and he's ap-

proaching it like any other of his projects – and with all the skill of a chess master.

Stearns and his team began by going all over the country, looking at other programs, seeing what works and what doesn't. Then he put together an extensive grassroots campaign. The five-year plan is a joint venture between the SPCA and Leadership Greens-

boro, which has taken on many other community projects under the wing of the Greensboro Chamber of Commerce.

And what is this master plan? A fine, old-fashioned good neighborhood approach. Stearns has divided the county into 64 neighborhoods and 100 communities. With the help of the Greensboro police department, each neighborhood will have eight block leaders who will be the active eyes and ears in each neighborhood of the whole community.

"They will be looking for opportunities to do the spay/neuter with our transportation van until all pets are spayed and neutered. They will also be creating an e-mail list where we can do 'Pet of the Week' promotions by email. Our ultimate goal is to have 100,000 e-mails by 5 years from now. I think it will potentially band together all the communities," he says.

He has also enlisted the fire department. ("Maybe we will have pet fairs there.") And the symphony. ("We are going to touch over 60,000 children this first year with the symphony partnership.") And he's working with the Junior SPCA and Pets 911.

"We just opened our new spay/neuter clinic. The mayor cut the ribbon, and there were prayers and a ceremony, and there was a lot of emotion around that. The neighborhood initiative touches every piece of everything that we do. And it gets it right down to the grass roots level so I think that's pretty special."

It can only be victory ahead for the chessmaster who has the drive to get mating in check. 🐾

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Five Keys to Starting a No More Homeless Pets Campaign in Your Community

► **By Dennis Stearns**

Create a BHAG – A Big Hairy Audacious Goal, or BHAG, is a goal that captures the imagination of your leadership, your volunteers, donors, and the entire community.

Our No More Homeless Pets program developed out of the Columbine School massacre as one of three Leadership Greensboro initiatives to try to prevent a similar tragedy from happening here. How does "ending pet overpopulation in five years" sound versus "Let's try to perhaps make the world a better place"?

However, you then have to have groups partnered with you who deliver on promises.

Recruit great leaders – One excellent leader is worth 25 average volunteers. Why? One excellent leader will "make it happen," carrying a mission through to the completion of the goal.

In order to accomplish a big mission, find great people and infuse them with your message. We spent three months recruiting for a special humane education mission before we identified and convinced the right person to accept the assignment. Result: this special program is almost a year ahead of schedule.

Do your homework – A great plan is only as good as the preparation that goes into it. Our leaders went to conferences and talked to experts local and national. Our task force studied programs all over the country. Some did well in certain areas, like adoptions, while others did well in high volume spay/neuter. We noted their strengths and weaknesses. We did a huge amount of homework before we custom designed our program to our community situation.

Expect excellence – How frustrated are you when you call your plumber and he doesn't show up on time for an appointment? Our research and focus groups discovered that the level of customer service in the animal community was considered "terrible." If you have an answering machine, return calls in 24 hours. Too many calls? Recruit more volunteers or partner with another animal group. The more you let quality control slide, the less effective your local program will be and the more animals will suffer long term as a result.

Be Positive – We have a rule that no one in our group, the Best Friends Brigade that we just established, our affiliate partners, or our community partners can "talk trash" about other groups in town to the public.

Behind closed doors, we can disagree on policies all day long (although this stuff also gets in the way of truly helping the animals!), but not in public. Our focus groups discovered that people are confused by animal groups not getting along. Collaboration is a key to long-term success, not just to present a unified front to the public and donors, but also because so much more can be accomplished working together.



Photo: Charles Brown/Stone Soup Productions