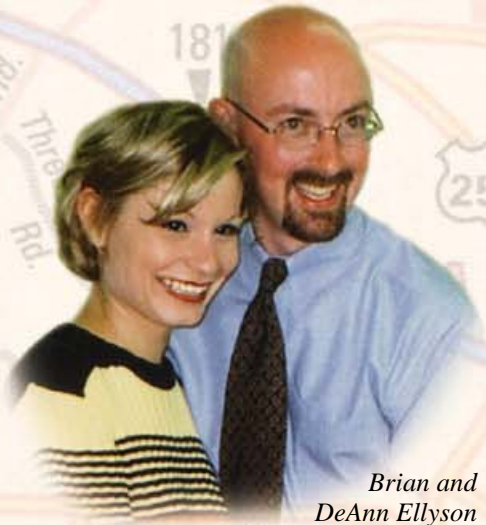


**no more homeless pets**

# When the Best Shelter Is a Caring Community



*Brian and DeAnn Ellyson*



**Richmond, Virginia, has become a model of what can be accomplished when a neighborhood bands together.**

**If it takes a village to raise a child, the same can be said of protecting homeless pets.**

**Robin Starr, the innovative director of the city's SPCA, says they've come to learn that the "best shelter is a humane community."**

► **By Estelle Munro & Julie Richard**

## **The Tuesday Club**

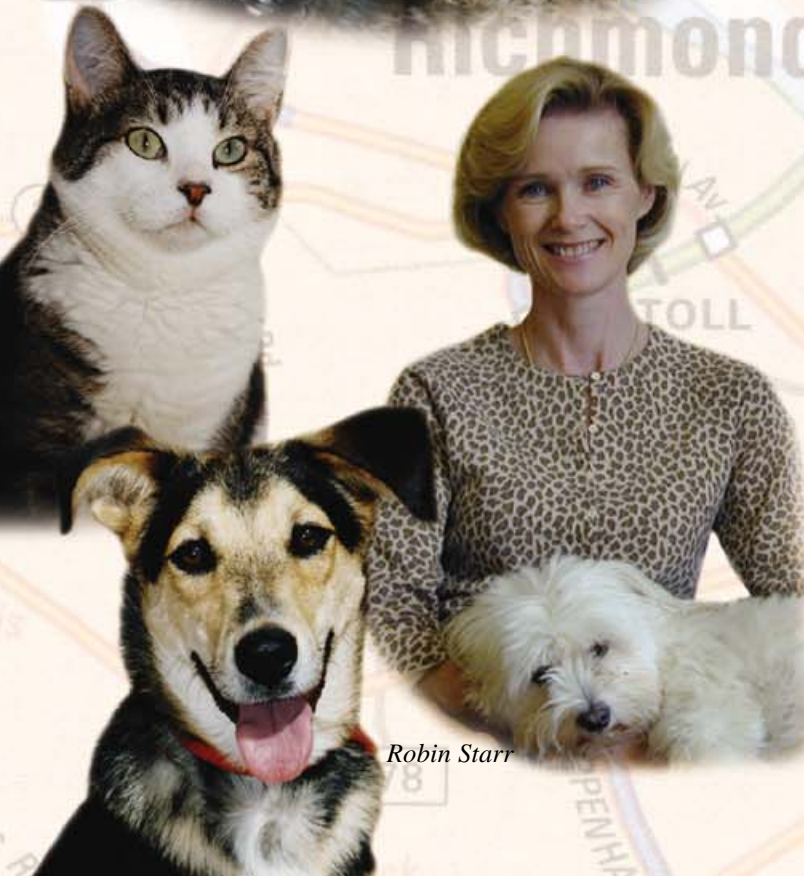
It's Tuesday, so the "girls," as they describe themselves, are in. Laughter trickles through the shelter walls, mixed with a cacophony of barking. If you pass by the kennels, sporadic snatches of gossip might catch your ear, along with the clank of cages being opened to be cleaned and the sound of an "oomph" as animals are hoisted with a double pair of hands.

Today is the weekly meeting of The Tuesday Club, a group of jovial, tireless volunteers who converge on the Richmond SPCA each week to help the animals and meet up with their pals. Joanne Veach and Sheri McGavic formed the club years ago while working together on a fundraiser. Others soon joined up, drawn by the camaraderie and the animals.

"It's just so much more fun," says McGavic of the weekly help animals/buddy parties. "It's really great to have pals there to help. Walking the dogs is fun, but it's even nicer if you have someone walking with you. You meet wonderful friends, which is a side benefit to working with the animals."

"I sometimes go on other days," Veach chimes in. "But I don't have as much fun as on Tuesdays when I'm with people I know. We're there for the animals, so I do whatever I need to do, but everything is more enjoyable when you do it with a friend!"

The group of ladies who do more than lunch have made a tremendous difference to the SPCA. But volunteerism has tended to be a mixed bag in the humane movement. Many city shelters and traditional humane societies discourage volunteer efforts, viewing unpaid assistants as loose cannons, not to mention insurance liabilities, out to break the rules and buck the system – too much



*Robin Starr*

trouble to train, and more nuisance than they're worth. For their part, volunteers themselves enter in a blaze of enthusiasm, only to become depressed and eventually drop out when their great "new" ideas are greeted by a tepid response and the number of animals needing homes seems overwhelming.

## Attitude Camp

But January 7, 2002, was the dawn of the Richmond SPCA's new millennium. On that day, they ceased taking the lives of healthy animals for good. They began operating in partnership with the City of Richmond, the Richmond Animal League, Friends United for the Richmond Shelter and Angel Dogs. And while the city would still continue to put down animals that had little chance of being adopted, the SPCA would guarantee the lives of all healthy, adoptable dogs and cats, and work toward the goal of No More Homeless Pets in the entire community by 2008.

As the shelter began to revise its entire mission, the senior staff realized that they could never reach their goal without building an entirely different relationship with the community – one that no longer viewed the world outside the shelter with suspicion verging on hostility and contempt.

So the SPCA sent itself to attitude camp, and is now not only welcoming all comers, but has also ignited a spark of enthusiasm from the community at large for their local SPCA.

"We found ourselves adopting a very different philosophy about human nature," says Robin Starr, chief executive officer of the SPCA. "By deciding to trust our fellow man, we were able immediately to stop a great deal of the carnage, and focus on providing the tools – both education and pet population control – that will truly address the problem within a few years.

"The old system operated on the belief that we had to provide people with the immediate option all the time to get rid of their pet. We assumed the worst about people. Now that we ask people to be humane and responsible about their pets, we're finding that they almost always rise to the occasion, and are becoming part of the solution."

Nobody knows that better than Janet Rand.

Elsa, her six-month-old adopted shepherd mix, was extremely jealous of the household's other animals. "If she couldn't get my full attention, she would rake her paw down my leg, often breaking the skin. I'd get horrible bruises," says Rand. "She nipped my rear one day for not paying attention to her. It got bad."

"I called the SPCA, and they directed me to Sarah Babcock, their behavioral expert. I didn't want to give up Elsa. I loved her. But I couldn't live with the situation the way it was.

"After an evaluation, Sarah determined that Elsa was the one trying to train *us* by pawing or nipping to get attention. We had to change our strategy. Sarah recommended starting with her food. Making Elsa sit before she ate or got a treat showed her I was in charge. The same with toys. Elsa had to work for these rewards, too. And we had to ensure that the pawing behavior no longer got Elsa the attention she wanted. I went in for training, and gradually won Elsa's confidence in me as the leader. It worked!"

Rand was so enthused that she later joined the organization as the spay/neuter clinic manager. "We bring our dogs to work, and Elsa loves that," she says. "It was all a big, old meant-to-be."

Counseling may seem like a no-brainer, but not all shelters practice it. Richmond didn't until they adopted new methods that have resulted in many more pets staying in their homes.

"I don't know a delicate way to say this," admits Denise Deisler, the chief operating officer, "but we were not exactly nice to people. We were very judgmental – we had a real blaming attitude about the community. But we stopped and thought about it, and really had to acknowledge that most people in the community do care. Most of them, if they knew the magnitude of the problem and the simplicity of the solution, would want to help.

"So we went into intensive staff training for six months. An hour a week, every week, with every single staff member. It was mandatory. We read all kinds of materials, not only from other groups but also training manuals on how to deal with the public. We scoured the Internet, gathered resources, started role-playing games. We didn't have a lot of money to spend on training, so we just found the material and did it.

"The result of that was that we started asking more open and friendly questions of the people bringing their animals in.

"In the old days, people would come to relinquish their pet, and we didn't ask them anything. We'd made a judgment about them because they were giving up their animal. Once you do that, the person across the counter will just shut down and make excuses. But we found that by asking questions, the staff were able to learn more about what the real problem was. This put them in a better position to help the person address their issue.

"When we shifted our thinking, the staff started to recognize that many of the people coming to us were really upset, and giving up their animal might not really be what they wanted to do. They just might not know that there are other options."

This kind of positive thinking has led to some creative and aggressive solution seeking that not only helps pets, but is vital to people as well.

Annie Bennett won't forget what the Richmond team did for her. When she walked through the doors to give up her cat – her sole companion of eight years – she was distraught. In her eighties, Bennett couldn't live in her house on her own anymore. She had to move to an apartment, and they wouldn't accept her cat.

In the past, a staff member would have said, "I am really sorry to hear that. Just sign this paper." But with new training under their belt, they made her problem their priority. The SPCA already works with people to find pet-friendly housing. But Bennett had already signed a lease. So Deisler got the property owner's name, and called him. Her first attempt was a no-go. He wouldn't even speak to her, and directed her to his leasing agent. But Deisler wasn't going to give up. She finally got him to speak with her on



*The Tuesday Club*

the phone, and pointed out that Bennett was a senior citizen, the cat her only companion – her only company.

“I explained that we didn’t need another homeless animal or her all alone, and asked him what the SPCA could do to help this woman keep her animal. He gave me all this business about cats ruining apartments, and I said we would sign a statement accepting responsibility for any damage by this cat if he would let this woman stay there with her cat. He said yes! You should have seen this woman’s face when we told her she could keep her kitty.”

### **The Goochland Gang**

If the Richmond SPCA has learned to have a more positive relationship with its local citizenry, the public has also learned something – that humane workers care very deeply about homeless pets.

For years, disgruntled animal lovers stayed away from shelters in droves, forming their own small rescue groups, dreaming of creating their own animal Shangri-la, where the four-footers in their care would never be destroyed for lack of a home.

When the Goochland Gang, a group of animal rescuers from Goochland, Virginia, found that their local pound had a truly alarming kill rate, they banded together, pulling out animals, and either finding new homes for them or adopting them themselves. That led to the idea of starting their own shelter.

But starting one’s own shelter isn’t easy. There’s property to be acquired and funding to be obtained, staff to be hired on little or no salaries, vet bills, food bills, and supplies. The dream was soon running into serious obstacles.

So when the Richmond SPCA learned about the group’s plans and problems, Robin Starr and her team proposed a pilot program in which the Goochland Gang would help, rather than replace, their local shelter.

Today, animals from the Goochland pound are taken to foster homes, where they stay until they’re adopted. The all-volunteer group hums like a well-oiled machine. They continue to recruit new people, and they look to the SPCA for direction and training opportunities. But they have a strong identity of their own. They’ve split into teams: one for fostering, one for transport, some to run the adoptions. The local vet gives the animals their first shots, deworming, and evaluation. And the volunteer group’s return rate has been almost zero. In the last 18 months, they’ve placed 160 animals through the program.

### **Project Safety Net**

In a community that’s becoming energized, active, and involved with their local shelter, the SPCA is constantly developing more opportunities to help, and inviting the community to pitch in.

Project Safety Net targets behavior problems (the primary cause of relinquishments at shelters). People are offered help in retraining their pet. And if that’s not an option, the SPCA offers to help them find a new home themselves.

“If someone insists on giving up a pet, we explain that we have a waiting list,” says Starr. “Most people agree to wait. They understand when we explain that we don’t have space and we won’t take one animal’s life in order to make room for another.”

This approach has worked minor miracles in keeping pets with families. In the waiting period, the SPCA tries to determine what the difficulty is, and then to help by offering other solutions. Often, by the time space becomes available, the problem has been resolved, and the pet stays at home.

“Obviously this doesn’t work in all cases,” says Starr. “If we

### **It’s Working!**

In the first eight months (January to August) of the partnership between the Richmond SPCA, the Richmond City Shelter, Friends United for the Richmond Shelter, the Richmond Animal League, and Angel Dogs, 1,118 fewer animals were destroyed than in the same period last year.

During these first seven months, 4,454 homeless animals were taken in to public or private shelters in the city. Of these, 2,833 were adopted or reclaimed by their families.

The private organization members of the partnership took 530 animals out of the City Shelter.

“The cooperative system that we have created, and the wonderfully supportive response from the community is directly responsible for this,” says Robin Starr. “People in this community love animals, and we are making this a truly compassionate place.”

think the animal is in any danger, we take them immediately. And if someone threatens harm to a pet, we inform the police.”

If the public is benefiting from the new power of positive thinking, they’re also helping. Volunteers take charge of adoption programs, and take their charges out into streets, local fairs, shopping malls, anywhere they’ll get adopted.

Special cases get their very own Press Agent! These difficult adoptables are assigned one person to be their personal publicist, responsible for getting that animal placed. They publicize them on local TV shows; dogs sport signs advertising their attributes while trotting through the park; cages are adorned with cute, eye-catching gimmicks to grab attention. As a result, tough-to-place pets are finding perfect new homes.

### **A World of Difference**

Richmond’s fostering program has netted plenty of first timers who’ve become committed, vital volunteers. Brian and DeAnn Ellyson are a typical couple who heeded the SPCA’s call despite having no experience.

“Our first foster was six black Lab puppies. It was like a baptism by fire!” Brian recalls. “Morning, noon, and night...feed, clean, feed, clean, feed, clean. Our second foster was a momma cat and her kitties. It was soooo easy. She did the feeding and the cleaning. We just made sure she was cared for!”

The SPCA still handles screenings and adoptions. But animals that are too young or sick to be adopted stay with the Ellysons for four to six weeks until they’re ready to go.

“We miss them a lot when they leave,” says DeAnn. “But it feels good to know you gave them that chance for a good home. And it makes room for others to be taken in at the shelter. I love that we’re helping, but I also love just having them around me!”

Receiving coordinator Wendy Kirkpatrick says the new bond with the community is making a difference for countless animals.

“There are still difficult situations – financial problems, sickness – that prevent people from keeping their pets in the home,” she says. “But many people just need some behavior training for their pets, or some help to find a good new home themselves.

“Just telling people that we need their help to do this job has made a very big difference in how we feel about the work – and in how much we can get done.” 🐾