

## Has there been a point when you decided to stop working in the animal sheltering and rescue field? Why? What brought you back?

*That was the question we asked for this issue's Coffee Break, and you responded with a slew of stories. In almost every case, your time away impacted your work for the better—fostering new perspectives and fresh outlooks on how you could be more effective in helping animals.*

welcome back!



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I'd been on the board of Kingdom Animal Shelter for three or four years, and we were having some strife on the board. I was feeling very discouraged and defeated. I resigned, as I was done with the stupid politics and personalities. After several of the people causing the trouble resigned, I was torn on returning. In the end, my desire to make a positive difference for the animals won out. I felt I could do more being in the organization than on my own.

—Joyce Littlefield, president  
Kingdom Animal Shelter  
St. Johnsbury, Vermont

I began volunteering at the Animal Welfare Department's Eastside Shelter in 1995. I used to walk in on Saturday mornings, before the shelter was open, before the runs had been cleaned, and all I could see were the bodies of animals being humanely euthanized. I knew in my mind that it had to be done ... there just weren't enough homes, but my heart broke. I swallowed the tears, and I told them all they were loved. When the numbness set in, I knew it was time to take a break. ... For a while, I used the website to get animals adopted, but refrained from actual contact with them. Somehow that just didn't satisfy my soul, so back I went to try, try again. Then I lost that one very special dog, and now I concentrate on pulling little rescues. My heart knows I'm making a difference, and no matter what, I'll keep on keeping on because every homeless animal matters, and they matter more than my hurting heart.

—Susan Smith, volunteer  
Albuquerque Animal Welfare Department,  
Eastside Shelter  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

I reached a point where I was overwhelmed by the sheer number of animals I could not rescue from euthanasia facilities. I had contemplated leaving this line of "work" when my local dog pound called and asked if I could take a very pregnant young Lab. Needless to say I did, and 10 beautiful pups later, all got wonderful homes—along with momma, who is so adored by her family. All the updates I receive about these animals and how much they are loved brought me back to the rescue life!

—Charlene Jacobs, adoption coordinator  
Talk To The Paw!  
Fenton, Missouri

It gets dark early here in our Pennsylvania winters. I was washing a very needy dog in the grooming area when all the other dogs in the shelter began howling and howling and howling. I looked around for another human, to no avail. I felt this deep, dark sense of hopelessness come over me. The dogs continued to howl, only louder this time. I began to cry and vowed never to return. My heart was broken. I couldn't sleep. I kept hearing them howl. And I would wake up with a sense of panic. I went back a week later and there were all new faces looking at me. I was afraid to ask what happened. That was at least 15 years ago. And I never left again. I realized if a volunteer helps comfort even one animal, if we can make even one little stray feel comfort for even a short time, it is worth it. We cannot turn our backs on them. We are all that they have.

—Lorraine Smith, volunteer/board member  
Hillside SPCA  
Hanover Township, Pennsylvania

I have worked with the SPCA for 18 years. At the time I started, our shelter looked at the public as the bad guy. Day after day, the flood of people surrendering their pets for reasons that we deemed unacceptable continued. It was normal to spend my drive home crying, I started to drink more than I should, I would lose my temper or cry at the drop of a hat. Other employees commented that this may not be the course my life should take, and I started to feel they were right. But in 2000, the HSUS Pets for Life program selected me to attend their first training in Denver. My outlook on sheltering was turned around! My focus now is on providing education to the public on realistic expectations of animal care and behavior. Training classes have been developed, as well as a help line and counseling, to help prevent animals from being relinquished. I still have days when I may still cry on my drive home (now and then), and I will always give my heart to those animals that deserve to have a tear shed for them leaving this world. But the kind of shelter we are today is one of humane treatment to humans as well as animals.

—*Donna Bainter,*  
director of animal behavior and care  
SPCA Tampa Bay  
Largo, Florida

Working for four years at an animal shelter as a veterinary/euthanasia technician, I burned out. It was a high-intake shelter. I had euthanasia duty two to four days a week and saw too many healthy, adoptable animals put to sleep. I do not blame the shelter or the protocols. We do what we can, but it seems like an endless road. I went back to work at a private vet practice. During my year there, I found myself still educating people and often defending the animal shelter, and why things happen the way they do in that environment. I realized that regardless of how difficult it is to work in a shelter that euthanizes, I would rather dedicate myself to one and do what I can to help. The public will never understand why we do what we do. They don't realize that it takes a stronger affection for animals to do it. It is ironic, but it's true. There is a balance of affection and understanding that not all of them can be saved, but we (I) do it because every decision we make, everything

we say, everything we do in this field makes a difference for at least one person or one animal.

—*Kara Montiel,* animal shelter supervisor  
San Marcos Regional Animal Shelter  
San Marcos, Texas

I grew frustrated when, as a staff person, I was no longer allowed to also volunteer for fear there would be a lawsuit (saying I was made to work off the clock). I had started at the shelter as a volunteer and was hired shortly after. I loved being able to volunteer in jobs outside of my normal job scope. When they told me I could no longer do that, I almost quit in frustration. But I have a policy that I cannot make a life-changing decision without thinking about it for at least three days. I came up with a compromise where I am now paid for the stuff I used to volunteer to do, but donate the money back to the shelter. I felt that what I was able to do for the animals was what was most important, and years later feel I have made a difference in many animals' lives.

—*Julie Cross,*  
animal care attendant  
Minnesota Valley Humane Society  
Burnsville, Minnesota

I left briefly after about two years in the shelter for a job in another field. I didn't think it mattered where I worked, and went for more benefits and money. It took me all of the first hour at the new job to realize where I was supposed to be, which was back at the shelter. Luckily, my old position opened back up, and I was hired back in a few months. I was there six more years before leaving for my current position in shelter management. I never regretted leaving, because it allowed me to become very clear about which direction I wanted to take in my life/career. I've never looked back, and can't see myself in any other field.

—*Cindy Burnham,* animal services manager  
Salinas Animal Services  
Salinas, California

***Congratulations to Susan Smith of Albuquerque, N.M., whose submission was selected in a random drawing from those published in this issue. Her organization, the Albuquerque Animal Welfare Department's Eastside Shelter, will receive a free coffee break: a \$50 gift certificate to a local coffee shop. "Bone" appétit!***

Check out the latest Coffee Break question and submit your responses (150 words or less) at [animalsheltering.org/coffeebreak](http://animalsheltering.org/coffeebreak) or send them to Editor, *Animal Sheltering*/HSUS, 2100 L St. NW, Washington, DC 20037. **Your answer may be printed in a future issue of *Animal Sheltering*.** If your response is chosen for publication, you will be entered into a drawing to win **a free coffee break (valued at \$50)** for your organization. Responses may be edited for length or clarity; no donation or purchase is necessary to win. See [animalsheltering.org](http://animalsheltering.org) for contest rules, or send an e-mail or letter to the above addresses to request a printed copy.