

Blankets and Beyond

Operation Blankets of Love spreads out

BY JAMES HETTINGER



Eileen Smulson, founder of Operation Blankets of Love in California, delivers a load of pet comfort items to an animal shelter in Long Beach.

Eileen Smulson says the collection of pet-related stuff stacked in her garage and shed in California is kind of like a tide: "It fills up, it goes down."

Smulson, the founder and president of Operation Blankets of Love (OBOL), initially focused on collecting blankets and towels to distribute to Los Angeles area animal shelters. Now her stash includes new or gently used collars, leashes, crates, dog igloos, cat scratchers, pet food, first-aid items, vitamins, pet shampoo, and dog clothes. Even in a bad economy, she says, people love animals and are willing to donate. The total rises and falls as she makes her collections and deliveries, but she says it never drops below several thousand items.

A onetime school teacher and former fundraiser for nonprofit organizations who founded a singing telegram balloon delivery business in her native New Jersey at age 25, Smulson says she likes to think outside the box. Her entrepreneurial attitude and passion for animal welfare issues have broadened the scope of OBOL, and helped it garner men-

tions in media outlets ranging from local newspapers to radio and television.

She founded the organization in early 2008 after seeing puppies shivering at West Valley Animal Services Center, a shelter near her home in Granada Hills. She says it disturbed her to think of her dog Ginger, whom she had adopted years earlier, lying on a cold cement floor.

Smulson voiced her concern to Capt. Jan Selder, then the shelter's manager, who offered her a tour of the facility. Selder says she explained that although the center was newly built and had heated floors, some of the cages were still cold, especially on windy days, and the shelter's budget didn't fund beds and blankets for the animals. They discussed ways that Smulson might help, and soon after she started OBOL, placing donation boxes at her veterinarian's office, her pet groomer's, and a local pet supply store.

The operation grew quickly, Smulson says, as she found out how easy it was to gather donations. Within weeks she had 15 drop-off locations and had collected hun-



Smulson says her rescue dog, Ginger, inspired her to start Operation Blankets of Love.

dreds of items. OBOL—run by Smulson with the help of her husband, Brad Smulson, and a handful of volunteers—now has about three dozen drop-off sites and serves dozens of shelters and rescue groups in 10 California counties, Smulson says. She says OBOL has collected more than 200,000 items. She hopes to attract corporate or foundation sponsors and possibly establish OBOL chapters around the country.

Blankets and towels are a big benefit to shelters and rescue groups—saving them money and helping make the animals feel safer, more relaxed, happier, and ultimately making them more adoptable. But Smulson has taken OBOL, which became a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) nonprofit last year, well beyond blankets.

She and Ginger, a certified therapy dog, present humane educational programs to youth and civic groups, sharing Ginger's story of being found on a desert highway.

OBOL also partners with local emergency rescue groups, providing comfort items for pets victimized by disasters. "You can call us the Red Cross to the rescue world," Smulson says. [AS](#)