

That Gnawing Feeling

A rescue effort at a California home removes 2,000 rats

BY JIM BAKER



Rats are adorable, highly social creatures—but you definitely don't want them living in your walls. Two fuzzy rodent faces peek from their perch at a hoarder's home.

It started with one rat. One *pregnant* rat.

A young girl—the daughter of a man in Llano, Calif.—brought the pet rodent home from her classroom, not knowing the little creature was expecting. She and her father soon found themselves caring for a mama rat and her pups, but didn't act quickly to separate the rats by gender, thus ushering in a period of free love, and, given the fertile nature of rats, babies. Lots and lots of babies.

Some got loose, and, within two years, the lone mama rat and her offspring had become an extended family numbering in the thousands. Rats got into every crack and crevice of the house—gnawing, burrowing, pooping—and before long, the house was nearly destroyed.

When rats escaped the confines of the house and started overrunning the property, the man's neighbors got involved. Rather than contacting animal control, though, they reached out to the company that pro-

duces *Hoarders*, an A&E reality show about people overwhelmed by the things they collect—some by inanimate possessions, others by pets.

That call set in motion a major rescue effort in November involving staff and dozens of volunteers from The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), United Animal Nations, Bay Area-based North Star Rescue, and Andy's Pet Shop in San Jose.

In two days, teams of rescuers removed an estimated 2,000 rats from the house. The man and his daughter had long since abandoned it to the rodents, though he continued to return each day to care for them. Ultimately, he was allowed to keep one rat—a male.

While large-scale rescues can take unexpected turns, the team wasn't distracted by the presence of a TV crew, or overly worried about how their efforts would be depicted. "We've done several cases now that have



Sara Varsa, director of operations for The HSUS Animal Cruelty, Rescue, and Response Team, surveys just a fraction of the nearly 2,000 rats eventually removed from a hoarder's home.

been filmed for TV, so we're fairly used to it," says Adam Parascandola, director of animal cruelty issues for The HSUS. "There are always instances, such as the euthanasia scene [in which a badly injured rat has to be put to sleep], where we're concerned about how they'll be portrayed. But A&E was very good about working with us to make sure everything was shown in appropriate context."

After they were removed from the property, the rescued rats were sorted into small groups, placed in large plastic bins, and transported five hours from Llano to San Jose in an 18-wheel, climate-controlled truck provided by The HSUS. They were met at Andy's Pet Shop—a store that sells pet supplies and showcases adoptable animals from local rescue groups and shelters—by staff and volunteers from Sacramento-based United Animal Nations and North

Star Rescue, which specializes in companion rodents and rabbits.

The store's owners, Lissa Shoun and her husband, Eric Bong, had agreed to allow the rescue teams to transform 6,000 square feet of their property into a temporary shelter for the rats. But the concrete floor would need to be refinished and sealed first. Screaming Flea Productions, which produces *Hoarders*, paid \$10,500 to get it done. PetSmart Charities donated food, bedding, cages, and other supplies.

Teams from United Animal Nations and North Star Rescue worked together to unload the rats, conduct a meticulous intake process, provide medical care, and get the rodents settled into their temporary home.

It was hard to determine exactly how many rats arrived at the shelter, and just as difficult to maintain an accurate census. "The numbers kept changing, because every day, there'd be 25-30 rats being born," says Alexis Raymond, director of communications for United Animal Nations. Onsite preparations included setting up a "maternity ward" for pregnant rats and nursing mothers.

None of the rescue teams had ever dealt with an operation quite like this before, involving so many animals (all of them small and from one species), requiring so much effort to extract them from a property, set up an appropriate temporary shelter, and coordinate so many volunteers. "We tend to place between 300-400 animals every year with our foster system, so this is three to four years of capacity all at once," says Lauren Paul, North Star Rescue's founder and president. "We had a lot of really great volunteers come to sign on when they saw the magnitude of this project."

More than 500 of the rats have been adopted, and others have been taken in by rescue groups and shelters. No intact males and females are adopted out to one home, to prevent future breeding. Some of the rats will find permanent homes with HSUS staff, and their cross-county transportation was being worked out at press time. Four or five people at the organization's office in Gaithersburg, Md.—including chief of staff Laura Maloney—plan to adopt a number of them. "I'm adopting [a male-female pair

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named] Dagwood and Blondie. I'm keeping them at the office during the week and at home on weekends. They have cute little hammocks and everything," Maloney says.

Meanwhile, Andy's Pet Shop has been busy selling food, bedding, and cages to new adopters. The rodents have created quite a sensation at the store, attracting many visitors. "We've got some of the cages set up in the windows, so people can see them even after we're closed, which actually is when they're most active and interesting," Shoun says. "I love hearing the comments from people as they walk by ... 'Oh, I saw those rats on TV—this is where they came.'"

It's been an unusual episode for the store, its owners, and three staff members—perhaps more than they bargained for. "It's been crazy, it's been hectic, but also rewarding. So many people are so thankful that we're doing it, and it's been quite an adventure, and I'm never gonna do it again," Shoun says, laughing. 



A hoarder allowed his pet rats to take over his entire house, which they nearly destroyed. Furniture and 2,000 rodents aren't a good mix.

Saving Animals, Saving the Planet

A Louisiana parish upgrades to a green shelter

Change has come to Plaquemines Parish in a big, green way.

The jurisdiction at the mouth of the Gulf of Mexico in Louisiana recently built a \$3.8 million animal shelter in Belle Chasse that aims to save not only animals, but energy. The shelter features many environmentally friendly amenities, from a permeable parking lot that allows rainwater to seep into the ground (thus reducing runoff) to a geothermal HVAC system that saves electricity by pulling heat from the Earth via underground pipes.

Officials plan to seek certification from the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program, a federal initiative that recognizes buildings for incorporating environmentally beneficial design and construction features. The facility could become not only the first LEED-certified animal shelter in the region, but also one of only a handful in the country, and the first LEED-certified building in the parish, says Raymund Ferrer, superintendent of the parish's animal control department.

Plaquemines Parish has never before had a true animal shelter, Ferrer says. It's had a cinderblock "animal pound"—a six-kennel dog facility with a small area for cats, built more than 30 years ago next to a solid-waste dump and a sewage treatment plant.

Shortly after animal lover Billy Nungesser was elected parish president in 2006, Ferrer approached him about constructing a better facility. Nungesser liked the idea, Ferrer says, and also gave his blessing to the proposal to go green.

But it's not just a greener facility: The new shelter is an improvement in every way imaginable, Ferrer says. The old building was a couple of hundred square feet; the new shelter is 13,728 square feet. The new facility contains more of the design features that should be part of a modern shelter, such as sealed flooring and controlled-air environments to reduce the chance of a disease outbreak. The old cinderblock structure had no sealed flooring and no air conditioning, much less the zoned HVAC



Sue Sampey of the Plaquemines Animal Welfare Society in Louisiana plays with dog on a "pop it"-style water sprinkler system at the parish's new animal shelter.

systems found in newer shelters. The new shelter will have a healthy holding room, isolation room, and quarantine room—divided holding areas the old structure lacked.

And the new shelter is located next to a recreational parks-and-trails system and an elementary school—which Ferrer says will attract more potential adopters and help boost employee morale. "You're not surrounded by odor," he notes. "You're not in a dark and dingy place any longer."

LEED certification "kind of makes you one of the elite," says Bruce Hoffman, president of Gulf GeoExchange and Consulting Services Inc. in Slidell, La., which developed the shelter's mechanical, electrical, and plumbing specifications. "Everybody wants to be associated with it." LEED-certified buildings get a plaque listing their environmental features, he explains, and also become eligible for grants and tax breaks.

"That little plaque on the wall might get us a few more people coming through now and again," says Jacob Stroman, shelter director for the Plaquemines Animal Welfare

Society (PAWS), which will share the new, parish-owned shelter with the parish animal control department.

Hoffman, a LEED-accredited professional and a consultant for the shelter, expects the shelter's LEED application to be approved by the end of the year. Among the building's many green features, the walls and roof are made out of aerated concrete, an energy-efficient material that provides superior insulation, he explains. The paint, floor coatings, and wood finishes have low amounts of volatile organic compounds, which will increase indoor air quality. Much of the shelter is made of recycled material. The roof has systems to capture rainwater, which can be used to water the lawn. The lighting is sensor-controlled to shut off automatically when a room is not occupied.

The environmental features increased the upfront costs, but the added expense will largely be recaptured in energy savings over the building's lifetime, Ferrer says. The geothermal heat pump system, for example, requires no fossil fuels and is expected to last

longer and require less maintenance than other systems.

Ferrer says the new shelter sends a message that Plaquemines Parish is conscientious about green energy, and that the era of poorly lit “pounds” located near the dump is over.

When animal control department employees and some animals moved into the new facility in mid-February, Ferrer says his officers reported an immediate difference in the working environment. The office is more spacious, the windows are positioned in a way that allows more natural light to enter, and the kennels are much easier to clean, he says.

“You walk into it, and you don’t even think you’re in a kennel,” adds Hoffman. The building is divided into 14 separate zones with their own HVAC systems, which means the areas housing animals get plenty of fresh air, negating the shelter’s inherent smells.

The concrete mixed with air is light but sturdy, making the shelter more durable than

a stick-built structure, Hoffman says. “This is basically a concrete bunker,” he notes—and it can survive even a storm similar in strength to Hurricane Katrina.

Having the parish animal control department under the same roof as the private, nonprofit PAWS is unusual but not unique, Ferrer says. Founded in 2003, PAWS has helped find new homes for parish shelter animals, while also rescuing strays and taking in surrenders. Stroman acknowledges that there will be “some interesting dynamics” because PAWS is a no-kill, limited-admission organization and hopes to stay that way, while the parish shelter is open admission. But neither Stroman nor Ferrer expects a problem. Noting that the organizations have worked together for several years, Ferrer says, “PAWS is fully aware of animal control’s unfortunate job.”

PAWS spent years headquartered in an old office building with an attached warehouse—which Stroman describes as dank, dilapidated, poorly ventilated, and lacking the durable surfaces required for effective clean-

ing. “It’s really not a functional shelter,” says PAWS executive director Sue Sampey.

Naturally, PAWS officials are ecstatic to be moving to the new parish shelter. Cats will have indoor/outdoor play areas and be able to move at will, and PAWS is consulting with the Tulane University architecture school to develop interactive toys for cats. “I keep describing the new cat play area as ‘as close to Disneyland as you can get for a cat,’” Stroman says.

The giant play yard for dogs will be inviting for volunteers, Stroman says. He envisions a big “hamster wheel” for dogs that could possibly produce electricity, and a program where volunteers exercise the dogs on the nearby trails. The new shelter is loaded with potential.

“We’re thrilled about the new place,” Stroman says, “because we’ll be able to do so much more.” **AS**



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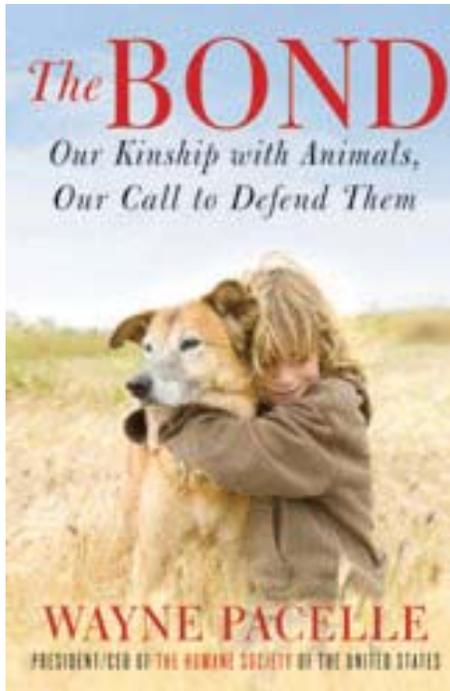
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Dreaming the Possible Dream

A new book takes aim at a wide range of cruelties to animals—and provides a roadmap for moving beyond them



*In his new book, *The Bond: Our Kinship With Animals, Our Call to Defend Them*, Wayne Pacelle, president and CEO of The Humane Society of the United States, takes a broad look at the origins of the human-animal bond and the severing of that bond in the industrial era, and goes on to present a vision for a new humane economy. *The Bond* tackles issues ranging from factory farming to the ongoing cruelties of the Canadian seal hunt to the challenge of ending pet homelessness and euthanasia.*

In the sections excerpt below, Pacelle writes about one of the ongoing difficulties facing both pets and the animal shelters that care for them: the inherent cruelties and misleading marketing of pets born in puppy mills. "If another 20 percent of pet owners acquired their next dog from a shelter—or a total of 45 percent of all people with dogs—we would solve the problem, and every healthy dog would in time find a home. With a decent marketing campaign and some money behind it, along with a lot of hard work, there is no reason we cannot get there by 2020," Pacelle writes. But one of the challenges in getting there, he notes, is taking on the industries that are more concerned about profits than animals' lives.

From *The Bond: Our Kinship with Animals, Our Call to Defend Them*

The major national organizations, including The HSUS, the World Society for the Protection of Animals, Maddie's Fund, and others, have set a great goal: to end the euthanasia of healthy dogs and cats in America by the year 2020. A lot of people on the ground believe we can get there, and I am one of them. One statistic in particular supports this conviction. Right now, slightly less than 25 percent of all dogs in American households come from shelters or rescue groups. That means that roughly three out of every four dogs come from other sources—from pet stores, puppy mills, small-scale breeders, or friends adopting out a litter.

There's still a stigma associated with shelters, the vague, sometimes snobbish, and always uninformed view that something is wrong with shelter animals. In America, of all places—the country of the second chance—you wouldn't expect to find that attitude, but somehow it survives. And the result is that millions of loyal, loving, and perfectly healthy animals—dogs and cats down on their luck after their owners moved, got divorced, or lost their jobs or homes—wind up at shelters through no fault of their own.

As disappointing as that 25 percent statistic might be, it also shows us the way out of the problem. It's a simple matter of arithmetic for shelters—all that's needed is a modest increase in adoption to end euthanasia of healthy pets altogether. If another 20 percent of pet owners acquired their next dog from a shelter—or a total of 45 percent of all people with dogs—we would solve the problem, and every healthy dog would in time find a home. With a decent marketing campaign and some money behind it, along with a lot of hard work, there is no reason we cannot get there by 2020, or even sooner.

Factory Farms for Dogs: The Tragedy of Puppy Mills

Not only are there many misconceptions about shelter animals and their fitness for adoption—there are all sorts of illusions and articles of faith about dogs from pet stores and puppy mills. And sometimes even the best-intentioned people, with a great and sincere love for animals, have no idea where the animals they buy have really come from.

When I was a teenager, my uncle Stan, my mother's brother and a man with a wonderful heart for animals, bought a West Highland terrier for our family from a local pet store. He thought West Highlands were adorable, which they are, and he purchased other Westies for several of my aunts and uncles. We named our little dog Randi and pointed with pride to the papers from the American Kennel Club (AKC) vouching for her purebred



Wayne Pacelle, president and CEO of The Humane Society of the United States, has written a new book exploring the human-animal bond, and addressing the widespread exploitation of animals in our industrial era.

status and Heartland lineage. Somehow it only made it seem more exciting that she had come to us all the way from Kansas. Only later in life did I realize that Randi was almost certainly from a puppy mill and that her AKC papers provided no assurances of proper care whatsoever. If Dorothy's Toto had been in Kansas in more recent times, he would have almost certainly started life in a small, overcrowded cage, exposed to the elements, like lots of other toy and terrier breeds at puppy mills.

When Uncle Stan first dropped her off at our home, Randi would dash into a bathroom and hide behind the toilet, with her ears down and her eyes wide. She was shy and fearful, undoubtedly the consequence of little or no socialization as a puppy. Early on, bolting out of some protective corner, she would often engage in manic behavior, running around the house until exhausted. Eventually, we worked through these initial problems, and she was a fabulous companion. She greeted me every day when I came home from school, and I was always so excited to see her.

Even so, there were still physical problems that proved more difficult to overcome. Randi had skin problems and other allergies, and she was plagued with them throughout her life.

She constantly chewed on her skin and had severe hot spots that we tried to medicate. She looked both funny and ridiculous wearing an Elizabethan collar, but that was the only way to inhibit her self-destructive behavior. We managed that problem, too, and she had a very good life with us, until she passed away at about fourteen years old.

Today as I look back upon it, I wonder about the choices we made as a family. Here we were—a family that loved animals—yet we had no idea we had supported a puppy-mill operation by patronizing a pet store. We had obtained a dog bred and born fifteen hundred miles away, but there was a city animal shelter less than a quarter mile from our home—you could actually see it from our front door. There, we could have also gotten a great dog. Randi was a dear companion and we loved her with all of our hearts. But another friend, whom we never met, was waiting for us right around the corner.

I have learned, during my time at HSUS, that for those who want purebreds, shelters have them too—about a quarter of the animals they take in are “pedigree” dogs. And now, on Petfinder.com, you can search for just about any dog you want. Local shelters and rescue groups post available animals, and

Puppy millers have applied an agricultural model to companion animal production, and the results are similar scenes of squalor, privation, and cruelty.

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Despite a general disdain for puppy mills, the public has unwittingly allowed this industry to grow and expand, especially in the last two decades. With the rise in pet keeping, puppy-mill operators have capitalized on that interest—supplying pet stores with adorable puppies and, now quite commonly, marketing directly to the public through deceptive websites. When you fall for these marketing efforts, you consign

the parent dogs to a lifetime of breeding in confinement, and you enrich the mill owner, who will just churn out another maltreated dog for the pet trade. It is the cruelty my uncle Stan supported with the purchase of Randi without even knowing it.

Cracking Down on Cruelty

The HSUS assists police and local humane authorities throughout the country in their efforts to enforce the law. One puppy mill we raided in 2008 in Tennessee—Pine Bluff Kennels—was an Internet seller with a beautiful website with pastoral images. “We have a small farm . . . about 90 acres,” read the site. “We love the setting and so do our animals as they have plenty of room to run and play without being a bother to our neighbors.” In reality, the owner never let anybody come to the “small farm” and instead shipped dogs by air to customers or sold puppies in parking lots or at flea markets.

After working with an informant and raiding the location with sheriff’s deputies, we found something quite different than the website described. We found 450 dogs, almost all the smaller breeds, in raised, crowded, squalid hutches and makeshift kennels in an overgrown field and hidden back in the woods. Another 250 dogs, mothers and puppies, were in the filthiest trailer you could imagine. None of them was being properly fed, and 90 percent had no access to water.

Puppy mills attach nice-sounding names to their facilities to give the appearance of quality care, like a hellhole we raided in Pennsylvania called “Almost Heaven.” These operations are factory farms for dogs, and the dogs produced are a cash crop—the business model being to produce the most dogs at the lowest cost. But factory farms for food animals are standardized operations, with the same confinement systems used from one location to another. At puppy mills, the arrangements are improvised, with many variations on the confinement theme.

At one particularly sickening mill in Quebec that we shut down, the couple operating the mill occupied a perfectly respectable living space, with two or three pet dogs living on the ground floor and the second floor in great shape. But in the basement, they had 110 dogs living in an ammonia-filled room that required our

workers to conduct their operation with gas masks. These dogs were living in that environment day after day. We even found two puppies inside a closet, in a large Tupperware tote with holes in the top, which meant those dogs were living in total darkness most if not all of the time.

The dogs who have it worst in the puppy-mill industry are the breeding females. The mother dogs are conscripted to serve as breeding machines, producing litter after litter. The puppies are sold at eight weeks, but a mother may stay for eight years or more, sometimes even being sold at auction once a mill decides she's no longer valuable. Puppy millers have applied an agricultural model to companion animal production, and the results are similar scenes of squalor, privation, and cruelty. We estimate that there are more than ten thousand puppy mills in the nation, with Missouri, Oklahoma, Iowa, Kansas, and Arkansas being the top producers and worst offenders. In Virginia, the U.S. Department of Agriculture listed seventeen licensed commercial breeders, but we found nearly a thousand—exposing the enormous gaps in the current federal inspections program. Most puppy mills today are not inspected at all, either by state or federal regulators. In all, two to four million puppies are churned out by mills each year.

Gentle Ben's New Life

In 2009, on the morning of one raid in Arkansas, our animal rescue team followed sheriff's deputies down the long dirt road leading to a man they intended to arrest. They knew they were close when the unmistakable stench of animal filth filled the country air. What they saw was a familiar scene at puppy mills: hundreds of dogs confined to rusty wire cages, wallowing in their own waste, in various states of mental and physical disrepair. Many of them had matted fur, urine burns on their paws, and any number of other ailments. The house itself had all the telltale signs of an improperly kept breeding facility, complete with stacks of American Kennel Club registration papers—and an owner who suffered from compulsive hoarding, a common psychological disorder among

irresponsible animal keepers. Hoarding is an odd rupture of the human-animal bond, in which people who purport to care about animals actually neglect them and inflict terrible harm.

Inside that house in Arkansas were another hundred dogs confined to more wire cages. Their cages were stacked on top of a urine-soaked carpet and surrounded by waist-high piles of sales records and books. Rescuers, wearing breathing masks to walk through this swamp of filth, found a litter of day-old pups, all barely moving except the runt, who lay seemingly lifeless on fouled newspapers. It was hard to believe that anyone would want to buy these dogs to begin with, but once these little ones were cleaned up, an unsuspecting buyer would have no idea of the hell the poor creatures had gone through in the weeks and months before.

Housed in the center aisle in two rows of kennels was the most pitiable sight: a massive, 130-pound, aging Akita who seemed to be blind and deaf. The ten-year-old dog had lived out his entire existence in this small "alley" with a concrete floor. At many places, he would have been killed or auctioned off. But this puppy-mill operator had the collector's mind-set, and that spared him from death but not misery.

Many dogs left to endure such an existence would be aggressive, so he was approached with extra caution. But this big guy was as gentle as a lamb. When finally coaxed from the rear of his pen, he walked as far as the door, and then stopped abruptly, too scared to leave the prison that had been the only thing he had ever known. Our staff then took him to be examined and fed a proper meal, and for the first time in his life, he was given a name: Gentle Ben.

Although veterinarians eventually had to remove Ben's sightless eyes, due to extreme pain, he's doing very well in his new life. He was taken in by Akita Rescue of Western New York and has now found a permanent, loving home where he's spoiled every day. In his time, Ben has experienced the worst instincts of humanity, and the best. Ben's a happy old guy, and he sure deserves it. 

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Getting an Edge in Retail

Some shelters are learning that it's smart to provide supplies along with pets

When someone adopts a pet, their first stop on the way home from the shelter is often the pet supply store, where they can pick up all the accessories to make their new family member feel right at home. Bowls. Leashes. Toys. A crate. A cute collar. Personalized ID tags. Sweaters. Coupons for therapy, to help the animals get over the shame of wearing sweaters.

It's all available, and new adopters often have a blast picking out the items that, in their minds, make their new pets feel more like their own. Buying these supplies can help cement the newly formed bond, and many of the supplies—such as a good collar, ID tags, and healthy food—are crucial components of being a responsible pet owner.

Some shelters are realizing that, by allowing new adopters to wander off to find their supplies elsewhere, they've been missing several golden opportunities: The chance to ensure their clients are going home well-equipped; to ensure they have the right kind of supplies (and to steer them away from shock collars and other troubling items); and to make a little money that they can use for their programs and animal care expenses.

Many shelters have maintained a small retail space for years, selling a mishmash of pet supplies, T-shirts, and other odds and ends, with mixed success. But some have really invested in the concept of selling pet supplies at the point of adoption, and have seen the financial benefits roll in. And through collaboration with the P.S. (Profits for Shelters) program run by the dealer services division of PetEdge, a pet supply company, some animal welfare organizations have found ways to build a small retail space into something attractive and appealing to clients—and into major moneymakers for their programs.

The Greater Birmingham Humane Society's new facility opened in 2004, and has kept space for retail since the beginning, according to director of operations Jerett New. At first, the space was managed by an auxiliary group that supports the shelter, and offered picture frames and other knickknacks to visitors. Gradually, though, shelter staff



The Greater Birmingham Humane Society's new shelter opened in 2004, and it's had a retail space from the beginning. Adopters can buy their pets the basic supplies they need for responsible pet ownership, such as a variety of toys, leashes, and collars.

have taken over and have been offering the basics for responsible pet care.

"We don't provide a lot of the little frilly this, that, and the other," says New. "We try to provide exactly what we use here"—maintaining that consistency helps the animals feel a little more familiar in their new homes, he notes—"so we have rope toys, hard-rubber toys, and things like that. ... Leashes, collars, all the necessities we'd like for the animals to leave with."

At the Animal Humane Association New Mexico (AHNM), thrift store and retail space contribute to the shelter's coffers. All told, the organization has four outlets that brought in around \$440,000 in sales last year; the shelter's profits boil down to about 15 percent of that figure.

"Our sales have grown 10 to 20 percent every year," says Gary Weddle, director of retail operations. According to Weddle, AHNM offers only premium food to custom-

ers, thereby modeling the kind of supplies it wants animals to get in their new homes.

Both AHNM and Greater Birmingham have their retail areas placed where adopters and visitors can't help but see them as they enter the shelter. And New says that managing the store doesn't add a lot of work for staff. A volunteer puts in 20 to 30 hours a week helping keep the store clean and price items, but most of the sales are done by adoption counselors.

"At the time of the adoption with the customer doing the payment, they actually do that payment inside of our retail store," says New. "We pull them in there where they can not only pay for the adoption, but see all of the supplies as well."

The shelter mandates that every animal leaving be confined, so if an adopter didn't bring a collar and leash for their new adult dog, or didn't bring a carrier for a new cat or puppy, adoption counselors at the shelter ask

them to purchase the items on-site. It might be something clients would protest, but New says that the shelter keeps its prices highly competitive, undercutting local retailers substantially and offering basics like leashes, collars, and crates as close to cost as possible.

Both shelters have found their relationships with PetEdge, whose Profits for Shelters program uses a tiered system of services for its clients, highly beneficial. Larger shelters that can move more product to clients will likely realize the most benefits—essentially, the more an organization purchases from PetEdge, the more it gets back in the form of product discounts, free shipping, and merchandizing advice from retail experts.

That's a large part of how Lucy Bernardin, account executive and shelter specialist at PetEdge, spends her time. "The account managers don't only do sales—we work closely with customers," says Bernardin, noting that "with shelters, there's a lot of handholding. ... A lot of volunteers [who help run some shelters' retail areas] have no retail experience. They love animals but don't understand merchandizing. And the paid staff wear about 10 hats."

Bernardin helps PetEdge's shelter clients figure out ways to maximize their space and move more product; she even does on-site consults for larger clients, helping them to figure out the best place to put retail displays and make the areas appealing to customers.

For shelters, says Bernardin, including retail space is a no-brainer and should be part of the considerations for any organization thinking of building a new facility. And with the economy in its current state, she notes, nonprofit shelters should look at their operations and acknowledge that while they'll always rely on donations, there are other ways they can bring in money to support their programs and save more animals' lives. [AS](#)

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Common Tools for a Common Mission

BY JUDY CALHOUN, CFRE, CAWA

During the Society of Animal Welfare Administrators' conference in November, we focused on a mission that all shelter staff have in common: the drive to find permanent loving homes for our furry, hairy, feathery, or scaly companions. Although the animal welfare field is made up of agencies and organizations of diverse sizes and strategies, shelters share similar needs and therefore benefit from many of the same tools. We invited members from around the country who partner with us on a variety of initiatives to share information we could all find beneficial in a popular session called "Saving More Lives ... A Toolkit for Local Shelters."

Our presenters included Bert Troughton, MSW, vice president of ProLearning at the ASPCA; Susana Della Maddalena, vice president and executive director of PetSmart Charities; and Rich Avanzino, president of Maddie's Fund. Their session focused on useful tools that shelters sometimes overlook, including grant opportunities, current research studies and recent research findings, ways to increase spay/neuter and adoption, and transfer programs. Below are some of the highlights from the session.

Obtaining grants requires gathering and reporting data, but the exercise is worthwhile. Not only can shelters gain an infusion of funds, the data collected is valuable in capturing geographic, demographic, and animal-specific data for analysis and future trend forecasting.

PetSmart Charities is offering several cycles of grants in 2011, including one for free-roaming cats, another for targeted spay/neuter efforts, and emergency relief grants to provide resources for animal welfare agencies responding to recent disasters.

Maddie's Fund currently has funds including starter grants, which focus on assisting with strategic plan development and tools to track pet evaluations; medical equipment grants to fund a full-time veterinarian for those organizations that guarantee adoption; lifesaving award grants for adoption-guarantee communities; and community collaborative grants that reward agencies working

together to save treatable shelter pets communitywide.

Participating in research has benefits to your shelter and the field as a whole. Tracking and publicly reporting the outcome for every pet in your care can help define organizational goals and priorities, create organizational efficiencies, enhance the organization's image, build public support, foster competition, and increase the number of lives saved.

Research projects shared during the conference included PetSmart Charities' research to identify motivators and barriers to both adoption and spay/neuter. ASPCA is gathering data to determine a valid, reliable method to determine which shelter cats are frightened and which are truly unsocialized. Another ASPCA research project, in which you can get involved, will capture address data of dogs and cats entering your shelter, and those who receive spay or neuter surgery to better target spay/neuter efforts in the future.

Adoption tools were also discussed. For example, the ASPCA conducted research with the Oklahoma City Humane Society and Oklahoma Humane Place (a spay/neuter clinic). The study collected baseline information from pet guardians who brought their pet to either a spay/neuter clinic or one of four participating veterinarian clinics. Those folks got an ID ME brochure, while their pets received a tag (and collar if needed). Follow-up phone calls six weeks post-intervention showed that the majority of people kept the collars and tags on their pets.

Some "free" cat marketing campaigns have been successful in getting cats placed during slow adoption months. But animal shelters have an ongoing concern about the possibility of "devaluing" cats by having such promotions. Researching the issue, the ASPCA found that fee-waived adoption programs had no negative impact on the bond between cat and adopters; the organization has developed a list of ways to implement such a program effectively.

Other highlights included mentoring on spay/neuter clinic operations through the Humane Alliance's National Spay/Neuter



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SAWA 2011 Conference Schedule

- Management Conference, Charlotte, N.C., June 8-10
- Annual Conference, San Francisco, Calif., Nov. 13-15

Response Team; the ASPCA's Meet Your Match-Felinality protocol to get more cats adopted; and a review of lifesaving transfer programs to relocate adoptable dogs and puppies from overcrowded shelters to destinations where they are in demand.

Check out links to the ideas here—and many more—under the Resources page at sawanetwork.org. If you have questions, please email SAWA staff at admin@SAWANetwork.org. **AS**

Judy Calhoun, CFRE, CAWA, is executive director of Larimer Humane Society and conference committee chair and board member of SAWA.





Staying Centered in San Jose

Jon Cicirelli keeps on course by focusing on animals, not egos

For Jon Cicirelli, deputy director of the City of San Jose Animal Care & Services department, dealing with the thousands of animals his agency takes in is the easy part of the job.

The hard part—or maybe it would be more politically savvy to say the *most challenging* part—of his duties is working with the two-legged creatures who cross his path.

"[It's] managing personalities and people—everybody's different," says Cicirelli, whose days bring a constant stream of dealings with employees, animal advocates, animal rescuers, elected officials, and the public. "Our business is a very emotional business, and there tends to be a lot of excitement around our issues. ... Staying calm and not getting personal about it is tough."

Cicirelli isn't just keeping his cool. He's been busy reaching out—forming partnerships with animal rescue groups; building

a coalition of public and private shelters in Santa Clara County to reduce euthanasia; serving on the legislative committee of the California Animal Control Directors Association; working on companion animal issues with the State Humane Association of California, the California Veterinary Medical Association, The Humane Society of the United States, and the ASPCA; and keeping tabs on bills at the state level that could affect animal control.

Cicirelli took the lead to revise the licensing laws for dogs and cats in San Jose, and in 2008, it became a requirement for veterinarians to provide records of rabies vaccinations to animal control, so the agency could efficiently follow up with individual pet owners, and collect license fees. "The result has been a *doubling* of our license revenue over the past two years," Cicirelli says. "We were tak-



Jon Cicirelli, deputy director of the City of San Jose Animal Care & Services division, definitely has his hands full on the job.



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ing in about \$700,000 a year [before the new ordinance]. This year, we're gonna hit more than \$1.4 million."

In fact, in 2010, his agency was able to cover nearly 50 percent of its total operating costs with revenue drawn from licensing, adoption and spay/neuter programs, and animal control contracts with four other cities. "That's pretty good for a government service," Cicirelli says. Especially during a recession, when city revenue from sales tax, property tax, and fees for various permits is falling—even the local airport is struggling, he notes.

Seeking a way to reduce the euthanasia rate for cats at his agency's shelter, Cicirelli approved a program called Feral Freedom, modeled after the pioneering effort launched in Jacksonville, Fla. Feral cats coming into Cicirelli's shelter are identified, have spay/neuter surgery, receive rabies shots and other vaccinations, and then, with the help of local cat rescue groups, are returned to their original location. Door hangers alert area residents to the program, and a website and cat rescue center educate the public about Feral Freedom.

"In just one year, our euthanasia rate for cats went down 40 percent. That's almost exclusively due to the Feral Freedom program," Cicirelli says, noting that it was Staycee Dains, his shelter operations supervisor, who researched the Jacksonville program and suggested that it might work for San Jose.

Beth Ward, chief operating officer of the Humane Society of Silicon Valley in Milpitas, has worked with Cicirelli since he arrived in San Jose; his agency was created in 2001, when Ward's shelter decided to drop all its animal control contracts in the area. In 2008, Ward and Cicirelli formed WeCARE (Community Alliance to Reduce Euthanasia), a coalition of regional shelters and rescues to reduce euthanasia in Santa Clara County.

"One of his greatest strengths is his ability to remain calm in challenging situations, and his ability to look at the big picture," Ward says. "He has a huge responsibility in overseeing the San Jose facility, because it's the highest-volume shelter in our community.

... He uses it to rise to the top and recognize that it's not all about just the work that he can do; it's about how he and his agency can work together with other groups to really make a difference."

Ken White, president of the Peninsula Humane Society/SPCA in San Mateo, a community located north of San Jose, has gotten to know Cicirelli through regular, informal meetings of colleagues in animal control and sheltering in the San Francisco Bay Area. "In Jon, I see a bright, energetic, committed, and smart next generation of leaders," White says. "He and I have not always agreed on legislative agendas [at the state level]—in fact, we have out and out disagreed on a couple of things. I have always, even in those situations, thought that his views were well-considered, and that his agenda was for the animals and the community he serves."

Cicirelli, meanwhile, feels rewarded by seeing the progress his agency has made during his tenure. "I feel like we're at the point where the city management and the elected officials support what we do, they like the success we're having, and they care about doing something good for animals. ... I feel like we've got a good situation going on here in San Jose."

He has a lot on his plate, and to stay focused, he keeps a quotation from Socrates on a memo board in his office: "Know thyself."

He reflects on that maxim when people make hurtful accusations, such as, *All you want to do is kill animals*. Cicirelli heard comments like that during educational town hall meetings he hosted soon after he took the job in 2003.

He keeps his balance on rough days by remembering who he is and what his values are; that way, it's harder for difficult interactions with people to get under his skin.

But sometimes a dart thrown in his direction will find its mark. "And that's why it's so hard, because even the best of us have hard days, and people get to you, and you get a little upset. But you go home, you recharge, you come back, and you keep going." 



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Biggest loser. What's tops on everyone's New Year's resolution list? Losing weight, of course. This past January, the Oshkosh Area Humane Society in Wisconsin, feeling a little overstuffed, decided to shed several hundred pounds—of kitty. The shelter went on a 31-day Catkins Fitness Program, a plan that espouses cat adoption as a quick and painless



way to get rid of excess weight. Oshkosh teamed up with local gym Anytime Fitness to offer T-shirts, eco-friendly canteens, and seven-day fitness club passes to everyone who adopted purr-sonal trainers during the month; three lucky adopters were chosen at random to receive extended memberships to the gym. The program was light on the wallet as well: Each cat's weight was subtracted from his or her adoption fee. The bigger the cat, the better the discount! The heaviest cat adopted was 7-year-old Jasper, an orange-and-white longhair who tipped the scales at 15 pounds, though he insists he's not fat, he's just big-boned. In all, 70 felines found permanent homes during the campaign for a total weight loss of 400 furry pounds. Note: No kitties or staff members were starved during this extreme weight-loss effort.

Sealed with a hiss. For three years, Harley risked whisker and limb for the sake of his employer, the Animal Humane Association (AHA) in Albuquerque, N.M. The 12-year-old gray tuxedo cat, who came to AHA as a stray, earned his kibble as the shelter's "catitude" tester, going nose-to-nose with dogs being considered for adoption by feline-



owning families. A dog earned the Good Housecat Seal of Approval if he didn't try to eat Harley (rest assured, Harley's safety was never compromised). Though the test results were not 100 percent guaranteed, they were usually a good indicator of whether the dog would get along with the adopter's cat, says Lindsay Lancaster, the shelter's marketing director. Harley performed other essential duties as well: He helped interview potential volunteers, presided over staff meetings, and provided stress relief by draping himself in laps. In honor of his service, the staff voted him Employee of the Month in November 2010. In January, the AHA announced that Harley was retiring from life on the edge and would himself be available for a fur-ever home. "He'd been working hard for us for three years," says Lancaster. "It was time to say thank you." Harley was quickly adopted by a retired couple who has all the time in the world to shower him with the love and pampering to which he is accustomed.

Shelter finds head. Nancy McKenney, former head of the Humane Society for Seattle/King County, has flown south to take up the post of chief executive officer



at Marin Humane Society in Novato, Calif. McKenney was the CEO of the Seattle shelter for 19 years, during which she helped transform it from a shoestring operation to a major community asset with numerous outreach and assistance programs, nearly 50 staff members, and a \$3 million budget. In 2006, McKenney became the first executive director of the Petfinder.com Foundation, established in the wake of Hurricane Katrina to help animal welfare agencies fund operations, training, and education. She has also served as the interim manager for King County (Washington) Animal Control and headed up her own consulting firm. Marin's progressive reputation and diversity of programs and services enticed her to leave her native Seattle, says McKenney. "It is an organization with dedicated staff, a board interested in doing the 'right' things, and a great record of advocacy."

Treasure, not trash. Brick, steel, and concrete are the usual subjects of professional photographer Emil Lansky,



who specializes in architectural projects. In December 2009, he turned his camera on softer material—cats and dogs awaiting adoption at Pets Alive West-Elmsford Animal Shelter in Westchester County, New York. Lansky volunteered to shoot portraits of animals for the shelter to use in a fundraising ad. The facility is excellent and the animals

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well-cared for, he says, but the sight of hundreds of them waiting for homes left him with the feeling that pets are too often considered as disposable as paper plates or plastic bags. Though the ad campaign never materialized, Lansky has put the images to work in another way: He created a series of diptychs (two-part photographs) in which he pairs a homeless pet with a ubiquitous throwaway item—paper cup, plastic cutlery, bubble wrap, newspaper—and assembled them into an exhibit entitled “Disposable.” Aside from an introduction that explains the genesis of the show and encourages viewers to get involved, the stark black-and-white photos have no text. Nor is any needed. The juxtaposition of cats and dogs with items used and discarded with little thought sends the message loud and clear. Lansky showed the photos last summer at the Morris County Library in Whippany, N.J., and the Riker Hill Arts Park in Livingston, N.J., and hopes to see them used in some way to spread awareness of pet overpopulation and boost shelter adoptions. To view a selection of images, visit emillanskyphoto.com/disposable.

■ **Kit-mitment ceremony.** If you haven't heard by now about Solomon and Bruno's wedding, you've been living under a rock. No, they're not the groom and groom whose lavish nuptials are featured in *Sex*

and the City 2. They're two roly-poly tabbies who met and bonded five years ago at Ollie's Place, a small, private, nonprofit cat shelter in New York City. The former strays are like night and day: Orange-and-white Solomon is outgoing and confident, while Bruno, a brown tabby, is shy and timid. He rarely left his cage in the communal-living shelter until Solomon took the shrinking violet under his wing, er, paw to become his best friend and protector. Solomon would have been adopted years ago, says Michael DiCerto, a longtime volunteer at Ollie's Place, "but we felt bad separating them because they seem so close, and it seemed to be helping Bruno." DiCerto, who is also a filmmaker and author, wanted to get the cats some public attention that he hoped would lead to the pair being adopted together. He hit upon the idea of a wedding ceremony. So on Jan. 20, Solomon and Bruno exchanged vows at the shelter, in a service presided over by fellow feline Mario, Justice of the Puss, who also serenaded the couple with a reggae version of "Get Me to the Church on Time." The reception featured a cake designed and baked by DiCerto's own cat Cosmo, an Ollie's Place alumnus and baker of choice for all the local goodfellas. News of the wedding spread like wildfire in the same-sex marriage advocacy blogosphere, where the bold move was applauded. DiCerto hadn't intended to make a statement on the subject, though he did check with a few gay friends beforehand to make sure the idea wouldn't offend anyone. "It was about devotion," he says. To watch DiCerto's video of the wedding, visit vimeo.com/19419057. 



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