

How to Save a Life—or Maybe 300

Competitors in the ASPCA's \$100K Challenge test their limits

BY CARRIE ALLAN



The Washington Humane Society's Lauren Haggerty (middle), Marcellus Rooths (right), and volunteer Shelly Mayo keep the paperwork moving during the Empty the Shelter adoption event.

In an economic climate where municipal budgets are getting slashed, donations are down, and surrenders are up, some animal shelters have had the temerity, the chutzpah, the out-and-out moxie to step forward and say, *We know the reality. We recognize the challenges. But we're going to save more animals' lives this year anyway.*

Such a commitment is no small thing. And the shelters that competed in the ASPCA's \$100K Challenge, where the goal is to save 300 more lives than you did last year during the same three-month period,

were up for no small reward: The group that showed the greatest increase in number of lives saved stood to win that \$100,000. There are also awards for the runner-up, the top shelters in five regions, and the shelter that gets the most engagement from its community.

It's the second year the ASPCA has run the competition, a project that came about when the organization started considering crowdsourcing—in which a specific problem is presented to a large and undefined number of people to generate new thinking about

Life Preservers will explore the work of organizations and agencies that are pushing the envelope, engaging their staff, supporters, and communities to help push adoption numbers up and euthanasia rates down. How are they doing it? What does it take? We're looking for the class acts. If your community has made major strides, let us know at asm@humanesociety.org.



Jeannette Deskins, a visitor to Washington Humane Society during its Empty the Shelter event in September, shares a laugh and a cuddle with a pooch she hopes to adopt.

possible solutions—to figure out approaches to the problem of euthanasia, says Bert Troughton, the organization’s vice president of pro learning.

“We were looking for a way to work with a large number of shelters and have an urgent push to help them increase numbers of lives saved,” she says. “We were really trying to figure out: What’s the mechanism to work with a lot of organizations at the same time and infuse that level of urgency?”

While 2010’s challenge took in the first 50 eligible contestants that applied, in 2011, the ASPCA made competitors strut their stuff to even get into the race. Last year’s community engagement award involved an online vote, with the top three vote-getters becoming the finalists for that honor. “Even shelters who didn’t make it into the top [contestants] saw their community coming out in spades to support them, and it dawned on us, ‘Oh god, we did this at the end? We should have done this at the beginning!’” Troughton recalls.

That’s what they did. This year, to make it into that final 50, competing organizations had to qualify by getting supporters to vote for them. “By having that qualifying heat at the beginning, these

shelters get a sense right off the bat of how the community is behind them, and then they can keep going back to those people and saying, ‘You helped us get here, now help us win.’ And it seemed more fair ... it seemed to reward those folks who were really going to pull out all the stops,” says Troughton.

It makes sense: Since increasing adoptions and ending euthanasia require an engaged, supportive community, it stands to reason that groups with more community backup might be ready to hit the ground running.

Friendly Competition

Community engagement presented a challenge for the Washington Humane Society (WHS) and the Washington Animal Rescue League (WARL), two D.C. shelters that both earned a spot in the final 50.

“We heard in the voting stage that people were voting for us one day and WARL the next,” says Stephanie Shain, chief operating officer at WHS. “So we were trying to figure out how to deal with the fact that people in the community already felt pulled two ways.” Shain notes that in a media market like Washington, where shelters have to compete constantly with not only local but national

OUR BIGGEST CHALLENGE:

“We started out with a bang with our 24-Hour Super Adoption Event. ... There was a lot of momentum and energy in the staff, volunteers, and the community. However, as time went by, it was a little more challenging. ...

While three months does not seem like a long time, it is just long enough for people to get tired of hearing from you if you don’t have the appropriate foundation in the community and your shelter.”

—GREATER ANDROSCOGGIN HUMANE SOCIETY, LEWISTON, MAINE
(IN 5TH PLACE AT PRESS TIME)



Shelters have to be self-promoters—like this dog at Washington Animal Rescue League seems to be!—to get their communities engaged. “If the shelters that are participating are shouting locally about what they’re doing for the challenge, and we’re shouting out to our members and the larger media, the hope is that it gives them more of a megaphone,” says the ASPCA’s Bert Troughton.

OUR BIGGEST CHALLENGE:

“Coming up with creative ways to increase adoptions. We already do a lot of things to let our community know about our organization, but it was finding new and innovative ways to get the message out.”

—HUMANE SOCIETY OF BROWARD COUNTY,
FORT LAUDERDALE, FLA.
(IN 3RD PLACE AT PRESS TIME)

news, it’s often even harder to make a dent in the public consciousness.

It’s a challenge they rose to meet in the best way possible: cooperation. The shelters announced their participation via a joint press release “calling on the community to open their hearts and homes to the many deserving animals who are seeking adoption.”

“We wanted to start out and set a really positive tone for the challenge, for both organizations to say, ‘This is a competition, but it’s a friendly competition,’” says Shain. “Because what we both want is more animals getting adopted.”

That approach goes deeper than the challenge, which—though intense—lasts for just three months. WHS handles animal control for the city and took in 10,120 animals in 2010; the shelter is typically overwhelmed with pit bulls. WARL is a smaller, limited-admission shelter (its intake in 2010 was 1,435 animals) with a medical clinic that

services the community and now also helps WHS treat injuries in animals it might otherwise have to euthanize. Each shelter plays a different part. But for far too long, says Gary Weitzman, a veterinarian who took over as president and CEO of WARL about five years ago, the two organizations coexisted without cooperating.

“We have, together, been here for about 250 years, and probably 245 of those have not been collaborative,” says Weitzman. “It’s an unfortunate reality in animal welfare. I think most organizations have learned to go on their own, and the old philosophy is that ‘We’re the only ones who are right in the way we take care of animals.’ ... Thankfully that’s changing. It’s just insane not to tackle this problem with the help of your sister organizations.”

Pressures of Pushing

Both shelters have held several major adoption events in support of their pursuit, including one event where WARL stayed open for 33 hours straight.

“I didn’t think people would really come in the middle of the night—and they didn’t—but they came in such droves during the day and then on Sunday that we were literally out of dogs by Sunday morning,” says Weitzman. “We adopted out 119 animals that weekend. That’s like our number for the whole month of August the year before. It was kind of a shock.”

Doing major adoption pushes creates new pressures within a shelter. In July, as WHS was gearing up for the challenge to start—it began Aug. 1 and lasted until the end of October—Shain saw where some of the pressure would fall: An adoption event at WHS drew a major crowd. “It was packed, and people were being as patient as they could, but still kind of getting frustrated waiting,” she says. “So the adoption staff feel the pressure, and we’ve tried to bring in volunteers very specifically to help in the adoptions department.”

Weitzman says his adoptions staff felt the heat as well, and that in the week before the 33-hour open stretch, “we had the hospital working at 130 miles an hour to get everybody spayed and neutered, all the dentals

[life preservers]

ADVICE TO FUTURE CHALLENGERS:

“Think big! Go for creative off-site adoption events in a busy public location to increase awareness and foot traffic. Don’t be afraid to pursue out-of-the-box adoption events and promotions to help bring in adopters that may not have previously known about your organization.”

—AUSTIN PETS ALIVE!, AUSTIN, TEXAS
(IN 1ST PLACE AT PRESS TIME)

done, all the medical issues treated because we do all of that before so they’re ready to go home that day. ... The line people, the hospital and adoptions and behavior and shelter folks, they should get Oscars for this.”

Tying Teams Together

Shain notes that one of the benefits of the challenge was that it pushed her shelter to do things that were already on its to-do list, but that might have gotten pushed to the back burner without the pressure of the challenge. “Training other staff to do adoptions was something we had said we wanted to do, but I don’t know if we would have gotten such a great response from people if it weren’t for the challenge,” she says. “I think every single person in our development department can now do an adoption and do the counseling. They’ve got their cheat sheets and they’re not experts, but they can do it.”

What’s more, she says, their participation has brought the staff together, helping people in one role understand facets of the shelter they might not previously have understood.

One of the staff in WHS’s development department, Shain says, helped out with an adoption event, and came in the Monday afterward with a bunch of pens she had gathered from her house to give to the adoptions staff, “because she had seen how small challenges can make you crazy,” Shain explains. “She now has this completely new appreciation for what the in-shelter stuff is like—how pens walk off with people and never come back.”

It seemed like a small thing, but Shain says the adoption staff were actually quite grateful for the random collection of pens she dropped off—and to hear where they’d come from. “For them, it was like, ‘She gets it.’”

Troughton hopes that participation in the challenge is an experience that will help shelters build that sense of teamwork and encourage them to reexamine their approaches. And she thinks that the challenge itself will raise all boats.

“The challenge is 50 shelters, which is not a lot when you think about the number of shelters and rescues we’ve got in this country ...” she says. “But the bigger piece is that this is how we all come together and we shout really loud to the public about the cause of animal welfare and what goes on in animal shelters, and really show this professional, organized, determined face of what we do to the public. ... We hope this really elevates the profile of professional organizations doing everything they possibly can and then some to save lives, and [shows] that the public can help and play a really meaningful role.” **AS**

The winners have now been announced; check them out at aspcapro.org, and look for their stories in a future issue of Animal Sheltering. Remember—the 2012 challenge will be gearing up soon! For tips on strategies, go to animalsheltering.org/challenge.

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