On the Road Again

In Washington state, a mobile clinic helps disadvantaged people and pets

BY CARREEN MALONEY

Veterinary technician Kathryn Weiss adjusts the lighting for Karen Mueller in the van’s surgery bay, which provides cramped but functional quarters.

It’s barely 6 a.m. in northern Washington state, cold and still dark on a December morning before Christmas, but people are already arriving in the parking lot of a big-box store. They might be mistaken for bargain hunters trying to snag a deal on holiday gifts, and in fact, they are here to save. But the deals they’re after won’t be found inside the Bellingham Big Lots store. Instead, the big savings are found inside a truck parked outside, one that serves as a mobile spay/neuter clinic.

The Whatcom Education Spay and Neuter Impact Program (better known as WeSnip) operates out of a mobile spay/neuter vehicle, one of two Spay Stations owned by Pasado’s Safe Haven, an animal rescue organization in Sultan, Wash. The two organizations are collaborating to serve Whatcom and Skagit counties’ working poor, unemployed, and those on social assistance—and, of course, their pets.

Their mission is to reduce animal births and, in turn, the community’s euthanasia rates. Their target is low-income communities, helping families who can barely afford to look after themselves. The crew on board do what they can to remove any obstacles that might prevent people from spaying and neutering, whether the barriers are practical, financial, or educational.

“If you don’t do it, they won’t come,” says Patricia Maass, co-founder of WeSnip.

The group’s proactive approach resonates with its clients, some of whom have been known to sleep overnight in their cars to make sure they’re on time to drop off their animals before they have to get to their jobs.

“That’s a big commitment,” says WeSnip volunteer Chris Haulgren, standing in the lot beside a battered brown van laden with file-filled boxes, checking people in and handing out identification placards for their dashboards. The placards tell staff all the animals have been signed in, and once they have, the pets are rounded up and brought onto the Spay Station for the day.

Come Together

In 2008, WeSnip was created to administer a low-income spay/neuter program in the Bellingham area. It was desperately needed in the community, and WeSnip’s creators, Maass and veterinarian Karen Mueller, who met years ago at a spay/neuter event, wanted to find a way to meet the need.

Maass had been a volunteer and foster program coordinator at Whatcom Humane Society (WHS) for five years. In her time there, she’d sat with many animals and tried to provide comfort to them during euthanasia, but the death rates had begun to discourage her. That’s why she helped put together this crew, she says—because by taking this act on the
road, it means other animals won’t have to die in her arms.

Mueller had been an animal welfare activist since veterinary school, and when she became a veterinarian, she gravitated toward animal rescue. Along with local projects, she’s taken several trips to Mexico to spay and neuter strays for Compassion Without Borders, a volunteer group of veterinarians and other animal advocates who help unwanted pets south of the border.

In 2001, she had worked on the first Spay Station, still operated by Pasado’s Safe Haven. That’s where she got to know Susan Michaels, the founder of Pasado’s. So when the WeSnip team was trying to figure out what kind of spay/neuter assistance would be the best fit for their community, it seemed natural for Pasado’s to fund the project, and to lend WeSnip the second Spay Station.

Pasado’s only expectation is that Mueller and her team reach 3,500 sterilizations a year, says Michaels—a goal the group is well on the way to meeting.

The alliance enables people to get the help they need—people like Tammi Lynch, who’s still in her fleecy pajamas when she pulls her cat into Big Lots. Toting a sleeping toddler, Lynch explains that she took in a stray cat who had kittens before she could afford to get her spayed.

Thanks to the Spay Station, that won’t happen to the next generation. If Lynch pays $30 to spay the mother, WeSnip will fix the kittens for free.

Lynch is grateful for the help. “I wish I had more money to donate to them,” she says.

Tomorrow, the van and its skeleton crew of vets, vet techs, and volunteers will move on to a new location. They cover a 50-mile stretch, sterilizing every cat and dog they can find. Since hitting the road in August 2008, WeSnip has fixed an impressive 3,400 animals.

Making a Dent

Their work seems to be having an impact on shelter numbers. WHS, one of the shelters serving the area traveled by WeSnip, has logged a significant decrease in feline intake, from 2,915 cats in 2007 to 2,422 in 2009. That’s almost 500 fewer cats in a community that—like so many—is constantly battling huge surpluses.

And while there’s no way to prove definitively that it’s the truck that’s caused the drop, WHS staff see a correlation.

“We have noticed a substantial drop in our cat and kitten incoming animal population, and because of this, a reduction in our euthanasia numbers,” says WHS executive director Laura Clark.

“WeSnip is incredible.”

There’s a big bill for WeSnip to keep on truckin’. The customized Spay Station cost about $385,000 to purchase, and operating expenses ran about $238,000 last year. Pasado’s paid $164,000 of that amount, WeSnip collected $57,000 from its clients, and another $17,000 came in from miscellaneous donors. This year the Spay Station will ramp up its schedule from two or three days a week to four, and the operating budget will likely increase to more than $300,000.

Thanks to Pasado’s grant money, spay/neuter prices are deeply discounted from those charged at traditional veterinary clinics. Rates range from $30 to $60, depending on species and gender.

But about half of the surgeries are performed at no charge, for people on social assistance. Given such a great offer, you might think that getting clients to take advantage of the services would be the easiest part of the job.

In fact, Maass says, it’s the most difficult.

Reaching the Underserved

Many of the people targeted by WeSnip live in neighborhoods characterized by poverty, crime, and rampant addiction. Some are senior citizens living on fixed incomes, or disabled people with service animals, or students who obtained a pet on impulse and don’t really have the money to provide the necessary care.

Making arrangements to sterilize these animals can require cajoling, counseling, and educating. Unusual situations are the norm; it all comes with the territory. It’s crucial to be accommodating, and so is having a phone line with a real person to answer questions, rather than the ubiquitous voicemail message. WeSnip’s clients, Maass says, “need a lot of encouragement” to take advantage of the service.

Maass and Mueller recall recent cases. There were the people who were supposed to bring their pets in, but called to say they couldn’t make it because their car was stolen. And the pregnant woman who was about to set off toward the clinic, ready to walk for miles in the rain with her two cats. Both times, WeSnip quickly arranged transportation.

“That kind of drama doesn’t happen at a regular clinic,” says Mueller. “When was the last time one of us had to decide whether to walk through the rain for an hour so our animal can get surgery? None of us have that difficulty.”

Forging trust and building rapport with people who are accustomed to being treated poorly and looked down upon are essential
to the project’s success. “We’re gaining momentum because we’re reaching out to these groups,” says Maass. “You can’t be the least bit rude, condescending, or judgmental. They don’t want people to make fun of them.”

That can happen at a regular veterinary clinic. Even if they could scrape together enough money to cover the cost of an expensive surgery, some of WeSnip’s clients are illiterate, so they can’t fill out forms, and they can’t read the after-care information that explains what their pets will need in the hours following surgery. That’s why a WeSnip staffer always takes the time to explain everything when clients return to pick up their animals at the end of the day.

“Every customer is treated well,” Maass says. “When I see someone with holes in their shoes who’s got no teeth, I say, ‘Yeah!’ That’s who we want. That’s our clientele.”

Spreading the Word
To find potential customers, WeSnip haunts the same places its target market hangs out. “We go where they sell beer, lottery tickets, and cigarettes, because that’s our clients’ recreation,” Maass says.

Besides putting WeSnip’s services on Craigslist and placing classified ads in free community newspapers, the group also spreads the word by dropping fliers at libraries, farm stores, food banks, and social services agencies.

But these methods aren’t as effective as old-fashioned word-of-mouth. “We consider it a real compliment when our clientele refers their friends to us,” Mueller says, noting that most clinics offering the occasional special discount don’t want it publicized. “Clinics usually say, ‘Don’t tell anyone I did you a favor.’ We want people to tell all their friends.”

It’s a purpose that inspires others to be part of the project—volunteers like Chris Haulgren, who checks in animals five mornings a week. The program’s impact on her has been profound.

“I’ve been doing rescue for 25 years,” Haulgren says, tears welling in her eyes. “And this is the first time I’ve had hope.”

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To some, horse-drawn carriage rides are a New York City tradition, an enjoyable way to experience the beauty of Central Park or the bustle of Times Square—and a quintessential Big Apple experience, like watching a game at Yankee Stadium or ascending to the top of the Empire State Building.

Others, though, believe the enjoyment the rides provide isn't enough to justify the stress the horses experience as they trudge through clusters of honking, exhaust-spewing taxis over asphalt that's hard on their legs.

For decades, carriage horses have carted people through city streets and Central Park, and the debate has intensified in recent years. The industry wants to carry on a tradition it asserts is safe and nostalgic, while animal welfare advocates are decrying the horses' "nose-to-tailpipe" existence and calling for the business to be discontinued. The New York City Council, which failed to act on a ban then-council member Tony Avella first proposed in 2007, is reconsidering that proposal and mulling a new bill—one that would phase out the carriages in three years, replacing them with eco-friendly replicas of antique cars.

"Horses do not belong in cities in this day and age. It's really inhumane, and it's very dangerous for both the people and the animals," says Stacy Segal, an equine protection specialist for The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS). The animals spook easily, resulting in accidents with motor vehicles, she says. "Traffic and horses really do not mix."

Several high-profile accidents in recent years galvanized activists and drew attention to the dangers of the industry. In September 2007, for example, a carriage horse named Smoothie panicked upon hearing someone beating a drum near Central Park. The horse bolted onto a sidewalk and then collapsed and died after the carriage she was hauling got caught between two trees, according to news reports.

Smoothie's death occurred days after the city comptroller's office had issued its first-ever audit of the way the city oversees the industry, which consists of 68 licensed carriages, about 200 horses, and nearly 300 licensed drivers. Among other concerns, the audit found that the horses weren't getting enough water, risked overheating on hot asphalt, and were left to stand in pools of dirty water because of inadequate drainage where they line up. The city was faulted for its failure to provide adequate oversight of the industry—the veterinarian from the city's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene never went into the field to inspect the horses, the audit noted, and the Department of Consumer Affairs did not perform the required number of carriage inspections.

A 2009 follow-up audit found that the city had implemented seven of the earlier audit's 11 recommendations to improve procedures for oversight. But the 2009 audit also discovered new issues, including the health department's failure to maintain an accurate list of horse licenses.

Animal welfare advocates say the industry's standard operating procedures remain troubling.

"Our New York City office is right by Central Park, and we definitely see day in and day out how mixing horses and traffic is an inhumane and dangerous combination," says Patrick Kwan, the New York state director for The HSUS, which supports both the proposed ban and the phaseout plan. City regulations prohibit carriage horses from working when the temperature drops below 18 or rises above 90, but Kwan says wind chill and humidity aren't taken into account, leaving the animals to work in extreme heat and bitter cold. They stand in hack lines for hours with no shelter from the elements, and walking on pavement takes a toll on their legs, he adds. Many people assume the carriage horses live in the park and get to frolic there after working hours, but in fact most are kept on the west side of Manhattan in stalls that Kwan says barely allow them to lie down. Carriage horse companies, rather than taking care of retired horses for life, sometimes sell them for slaughter.

City streets are no place for horses, according to animal welfare advocates pushing to ban New York's horse-drawn carriages.
The proposal to ban the industry outright attracted only about a half dozen supporters on the 51-member city council in 2007. Council member Melissa Mark-Viverito says the 2009 election added some progressive members to the council, so she hopes to gain more support for the new bill mandating the phased-in switch to replica antique cars—for which she is the lead sponsor.

The new bill has the backing of an advocacy organization called New Yorkers for Clean, Livable, and Safe Streets (NYCLASS). The proposal aims to be more palatable to horse-carriage operators by phasing out the business over three years and creating an alternate industry to prevent the loss of jobs. Each year, a certain number of carriages would be discontinued and replaced by replica cars with hybrid-electric engines that shut off when the cars stop, minimizing exhaust. The early-20th-century-style cars would give passengers “a feel of nostalgia, as the horse carriages currently purport to do,” while adding modern safety features—such as seat belts—that the carriages lack, says Jared Rosen, NYCLASS’s executive director. The cars would move slowly in the park and be better able than horses to keep up with traffic on city streets, he explains. Similar businesses currently operate in San Francisco and Prague.

Stephen Malone isn’t buying the idea.

A licensed carriage driver since 1987 and the executive director of the Horse and Carriage Association of New York (which represents industry workers), Malone calls the replica-car proposal “a completely unfounded business” and notes that the cars currently don’t exist. “There’s no way they’re gonna build 68 cars just for us, and then just hand them to us.”

Jake Delemani, a NYCLASS lobbyist, says the car manufacturer is still undetermined. Carriage owners would have to purchase the cars, but financing would be available through the nonprofit Partnership for New York City.

Further, Malone defends his industry’s safety record, asserting it has experienced only three horse deaths related to traffic in 25 years and has never been cited for cruelty. The efforts to ban the industry lack merit, he adds. “I’ll say one thing: Have we had accidents? Do we have mishaps? Of course we have. We’re not infallible here,” Malone says. “We operate in the city, but our track record is our track record, and that’s all we can say about that.”

The ASPCA enforces state and local animal protection laws in New York City—conducting monthly stable inspections and monitoring the horses on the streets—but Corey notes that, unfortunately, “not all behavior that is inhumane or commonly understood as ‘cruel’ is illegal.”

And while there may have been only a handful of accidents causing horse fatalities over the years, she adds that there are anecdotal reports of incidents involving horses and pedi-cabs, pedestrians, and yellow taxis.

The ASPCA backed Avella’s proposed ban and also supports NYCLASS’s plan to replace the horse carriages with the eco-friendly replica cars.

The plan to replace the carriage horses with cars isn’t drawing unanimous support from animal welfare advocates. Elizabeth Forel, president of the Coalition to Ban Horse-Drawn Carriages—an advocacy group that formed in 2006—says she favors the bill “that would ban the industry outright and not be caught up in the promotion of a fledgling industry.”

“What I’d say to her is the solution that NYCLASS is proposing is a practical solution,” responds Delemani. “… It’s more practical to do it this way because the city council’s not looking to put anyone out of business.”

Carriage horses in New York City mix with vehicular traffic and work in wintry weather. Carriage horses like this one in New York’s Times Square lead what animal welfare advocates call a “nose-to-tailpipe” existence—which has prompted proposals to ban the industry.
Bright Leashes, Big City

Brooklyn Bridge dog walk raises money and awareness for shelter pets

As he was walking across the Brooklyn Bridge one day last spring, Joseph Hassan got an idea. The bridge connects the borough to Manhattan, but Hassan was considering another connection: the one between the home foreclosure crisis and abandoned animals.

Hassan, an animal lover and public relations consultant who lives in Brooklyn, had seen a TV news report that included an ASPCA estimate that as many as a million pets nationwide might lose their homes due to foreclosures. “That number just kind of struck me,” Hassan recalls. “Obviously we’ve all thought about the direct impact that foreclosures and the economy have on us humans, but I’d never really thought about it kind of trickling down to pets as well.”

Hassan soon hatched a plan for a benefit dog walk across the bridge to increase awareness of the plight of homeless pets and raise money for animal shelters. Dubbed the Brooklyn Bridge Pup Crawl, the Sept. 26 event attracted about 300 people and 400 dogs, and raised an estimated $4,000 for three animal shelters around the country.

The support the event received from New York pet lovers “was really humbling and satisfying,” Hassan says. And it was also colorful, thanks to the glow-in-the-dark “Lulu Leashes” donated to Pup Crawl participants by the device’s inventor, Betty Gottfried, a retired dentist and the mother of one of Hassan’s friends.

“The leashes actually really helped out, because they kind of made everyone visible to the other folks who were on the bridge,” says Hassan, explaining that participants walked from the Manhattan side to the Brooklyn side on the walkway that runs above the bridge’s lanes for motorized vehicles.

“From a distance, you just saw all these illuminated leashes,” says Gottfried, whose battery-powered invention—developed years ago after she and her dog were almost hit by a car during a nighttime run—comes in two different glowing color combinations. “It added to the whole allure of the evening.”

The organizers decided to expand their focus beyond New York to emphasize that pet homelessness is a nationwide problem. The Pup Crawl website included donation links to three shelter websites: the Brooklyn Animal Rescue Coalition (BARC), Get-A-Life Pet Rescue in Florida, and Ace of Hearts in California. BARC is in Hassan’s neighborhood, while Florida resident Gottfried suggested Get-A-Life, and a friend of Hassan’s in California suggested Ace of Hearts. Walk registration was free, but participants were encouraged to donate to those shelters or another of their choice, Hassan says.

Getting Gottfried and her illuminated leashes involved proved to be a key connection, Hassan says, because “we could encourage people to attend and kind of light up the night to draw attention to the cause.”

Christine Kim, a friend of Hassan’s who works in the fashion industry, became a co-organizer of the event and helped get it publicized on East Village Radio—a hip, community-oriented station that Kim describes as the heartbeat of downtown New York. Getting the event mentioned on the station gave it “some street cred, if you will,” Kim says. She also had a contact at Pet Head, a manufacturer of high-end pet products, which donated items for Pup Crawl gift bags.

Pup Crawl organizers reached out to The Bark and Doggie Aficionado magazines for publicity. IAMS agreed to donate pet food to be distributed to local shelters. Volunteers designed a logo and set up and ran the website, which attracted about 30 additional volunteers. Hassan recalls, “I got e-mails from people just saying, ‘We heard about the Pup Crawl. How do we get involved? What can we do?’”

Kim adds, “We were amazed at how much support we were able to get from so many different avenues. We just kind of put all our feelers out there,” utilizing Twitter and other social media.

Organizers needed a parade permit from the New York City Police Department to cross the bridge, as well as a permit from the city parks department for a pre-walk rally in nearby City Hall Park. That process took several months and posed the biggest logistical challenge for the Pup Crawl, despite helpful staffers in both departments, Hassan says.

On event day the weather was cloudy, but the sun emerged late in the afternoon as people gathered in the park. “It was like the gods were looking down on us,” says Gottfried.

Hassan and Kim plan to stage another Pup Crawl in fall 2010. Any advice for a community thinking of doing something similar? “It might seem like a challenge, but it’s definitely doable. Just start early with [acquiring] the permits,” Hassan says. “If it can be done over the Brooklyn Bridge, I would hazard a guess that it can be done almost anywhere.”

For information on the 2010 Brooklyn Bridge Pup Crawl, visit thepupcrawl.com or e-mail thepupcrawl@gmail.com.
Next Time, Use the Door

Sometimes raptors make house calls. Luckily, so does wildlife rehabilitator Victor Collazo

Joan Fairman Kanes is used to taking pictures of wild animals in natural settings.

In her own home, not so much.

Kanes, a freelance photographer based in Haverford, Pa., a western suburb of Philadelphia, specializes in animal pictures, but her photography experiences couldn’t have prepared her for a visitor who flew into town and crashed her pad, literally.

Last November, Kanes was driving home when she got a call from her husband, telling her that a large window in their dining room had been shattered, blasting shards of glass everywhere.

“And while we were talking, I said, ‘Is there an animal in the house somewhere?’ Because my first thought was something must have gone through the window and had probably been killed in doing so,” Kanes says. “And he said, ‘I don’t see anything,' and he was walking around the house, talking on the phone, and then suddenly he said, ‘Oh my God—there is a very large bird on top of a bookcase. It just flapped its wings.’”

It’s never a good time for a large, wild bird to crash through your dining room window, and Kanes soon discovered that 6 p.m. Sunday is probably the worst time to try to find someone to come over and remove one from your home.

She got online and searched for wildlife rehabilitators in her area, trying to contact several of them, only to get voicemail messages. While she was leaving yet another message, a woman picked up the phone and, hearing about the situation, recommended that Kanes call Victor Collazo, who operates Skyking Raptor Rescue out of his home in Maple Glen, Pa.

Collazo, 44, is also affiliated with the wildlife rehabilitation clinic at the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education in Philadelphia, where he works with several types of raptors (a term that refers to birds of prey). He has trained at the Carolina Raptor Center in Huntersville, N.C., where he has earned certification in working with bald and golden eagles.

Kanes reached Collazo, and he arrived at her home in less than an hour. Using a special, soft net designed to prevent injuries to birds—and heavy-duty gloves to protect him from the raptor’s talons—Collazo quickly captured the feathered visitor. He soon identified her as a juvenile, female red-tailed hawk.

He examined her, looking for any blood or bits of glass in her feathers, and checking to make sure that her neck wasn’t broken. Miraculously, the bird appeared unharmed. “She seemed OK; everything was fine,” Collazo says. “She was a bit underweight. I believe she was trying to chase a bird [when she crashed through the window].”

Once Collazo had a firm grip on the bird’s legs, he brought her out for Kanes to see. “I said, ‘Do you mind if I take some pictures? This is killing me, because I’m a photographer,’” Kanes says, laughing at the memory. She was able to take a few shots without upsetting the animal.

Then Collazo put the hawk into a transport box and took her to his home, where he’s set up for rehabilitation work. A more in-depth exam revealed no sign of bruises, broken bones, or injury to her beak or talons.

Collazo spent the next several days caring for the bird, giving her a high-calorie vitamin mix for hawks, as well as subcutaneous fluids. During this time, he moved her through a series of ever-larger flight enclosures, so that she would have room to start flying and regain muscle tone. “Our objective with raptors is the quicker we can get them back to the wild, the better it is for the bird,” he says.

Less than a week after the hawk made her sudden appearance at the home of Kanes, Collazo transported her back to Kanes’ neighborhood to release her. (Hawks are highly territorial; if he were to release her elsewhere, other raptors might attack her.)

And Kanes—even the photographer—was there to witness the release, and got to take some pictures of Collazo releasing the beautiful bird.

She marvels at the fact that she was able to actually find a wildlife rehabilitator, especially one who specializes in raptors, in her area on a Sunday evening. “It’s entirely possible I never would have found Victor. I don’t know what I would have done,” she says. “He’s so full of information—he knows so much about hawks, and I found it absolutely fascinating.”

To learn more about the wildlife rehabilitation clinic, go to schuylkillcenter.org/departments/wildlife.
Even before Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast in 2005, life for homeless pets in Louisiana’s St. Bernard Parish was no day at the dog park.

The animal shelter was a ramshackle collection of trailers, outbuildings, and outdoor cages unprotected from the weather. By some accounts, it was also a warehouse for unwanted pets, badly understaffed, and constantly in need of basic repairs. There was no air conditioning to stave off the swampy Louisiana heat, and during winter cold snaps, only a few space heaters provided warmth.

Then came Katrina, leaving unimaginable destruction in its wake and forcing a mass exodus from the flooded parish where almost every home had become uninhabitable. For nearly two years, the shelter’s main building lacked its own sources of electricity and running water, relying on wires and hoses from a Federal Emergency Management Agency trailer.

By the time Cathy Landry joined the shelter in September 2007, she was one of two people on the skeleton staff, handling cleaning and animal care while the director did everything else. “It was a nightmare. … We had outside kennels where we had dogs housed, and they had to stay out all the time,” says Landry, now the shelter’s secretary. “The cats were in crates, and they were stacked three high.”

But following an arduous road to recovery, the agency reached a milestone in January, opening a new facility that’s nearly twice as large as its pre-Katrina operation. The $1.25 million bill was footed by FEMA funds, insurance proceeds, and a $250,000 grant and other in-kind assistance from The HSUS.

Now employing six people, St. Bernard can house twice the animals it once could—64 dogs and 30 cats. Dogs can move freely between indoor and outdoor runs, and they have a large play area and agility course. Separate ventilation systems help keep germs from sick animals away from the rest of the population.

“The community now has a place where they can go to adopt pets and find lost animals, as well as a place that they can be proud to call their animal shelter,” says Melissa Seide Rubin, HSUS vice president for animal care centers and veterinary services.

The latest development in The HSUS’s multimillion-dollar effort to help rebuild the Gulf Coast’s animal services infrastructure, the relief package for the St. Bernard Animal Shelter includes joint funding (with the ASPCA) of its executive director position for three years. The purchase of a new $80,000 transport vehicle, also jointly funded by The HSUS and the ASPCA, will help the shelter bring animals to more populated areas where they will have a better chance of adoption.
As the human population has slowly regenerated—to about 60 percent of its pre-Katrina levels—so too has the number of pets. Those strays who survived the hurricane continued breeding, and many people who lost everything to the storm have not been able to afford services for their animals. With support from The HSUS, Louisiana State University veterinarians and veterinary students have helped address the problem by performing spay/neuter surgeries and providing general care at the shelter.

New executive director Beth Brewster is now helping guide the shelter’s recovery. Before taking the job at St. Bernard Parish Animal Control in October 2008, Brewster served for three years as director of St. Tammany Humane Society, a private, not-for-profit shelter in Covington, La.

The Louisiana SPCA helped find the new executive director, according to Rubin. “[Brewster] was looking for a job, and she wanted a challenge. And boy, she got it,” Rubin says, laughing. “Everyone thought she was wonderful; she had a very good reputation.”

The building itself, though, is the jewel in the Mardi Gras crown. Brewster views the new Houndquarters facility as “paradise”—easier to clean, more comfortable for the animals, a more pleasant place for staff to work and people to visit.

Its grand opening is yet another affirmation that the hurricane-ravaged St. Bernard Parish is back. We are not going to be beaten by the storm.”

“[The] saying ‘Every time a bell rings, an angel gets his wings’?” Taffaro asks. “That’s what this is. Every time we cut a [grand-opening] ribbon, it’s one more acknowledgement that our community is back. We are not going to be beaten by the storm.”

Survey Says ... Get a Cat!

Results reveal mixed perceptions of felines—and some surprising demographics

BY ARNA COHEN

While cats are the most popular pet in the United States, there are still thousands in animal shelters waiting for loving homes. In an effort to boost cat adoptions and save lives, the Morris Animal Foundation, a non-profit that funds research studies to advance animal health and welfare, surveyed 1,102 non-cat owners about their perceptions of cats to gain insight into what may be preventing them from finding those homes.

The results show that the next wave of cat owners may come from unexpected segments of society.

More cats than dogs live in American households today—93.6 million felines versus 77.5 million dogs. Yet the American Humane Association estimates that nearly three-quarters of cats who enter shelters are euthanized.

The Morris Foundation had been meeting with different groups concerned about cats, says Patricia Olson, D.V.M., the foundation’s president and CEO. “It seemed that the pet industry was very interested in people who have cats to see if they could be persuaded to take one more. ... But I thought it would be fun for our foundation to gather some information about why people don’t have them in the first place,” she says.

The participants in the survey did not currently own cats, had never previously owned one, and had never previously considered owning one. Not surprisingly, more than half of the respondents had an overall negative attitude about felines, expressing concerns about their furniture scratching, hairball coughing, and counter jumping.

Other common concerns included the litter box smell, unprovoked biting, and a perception that cats couldn’t get along with other pets. Nearly one-third of respondents said someone in the household was allergic to cats.

On the bright side, about 20 percent of respondents said they might consider a feline pet. What they liked best about cats was that they’re playful, can entertain themselves, and make people smile. These respondents indicated that they would most likely adopt a cat from a shelter or rescue group.

Olson believes the pet industry should focus on this group. Many of the problems respondents identified can be readily addressed, she says, with solutions like behavioral training, scratching posts, and specific diets.

The most surprising results were the demographics of the 20 percent that would consider getting a cat. “If you asked me what population would be a good target, I would have said older women like myself,” Olson says. “It turns out we didn’t do so well!”

The survey instead found that 18-to-24-year-olds had a more positive attitude toward cats than older respondents. Singles, suburbanites, Hispanics, and men also responded more positively when compared to married participants, urban and rural residents, other ethnicities, and women, respectively—but according to the Morris Animal Foundation, very little marketing is being done to these groups.

“We who already have cats are ‘low-hanging fruit,’” Olson says. “We’re saying to the industry that they’re missing a whole population out there who could be your next group of customers that could take care of these animals.”

Based on the survey’s results, the foundation posits that if just 10 percent of non-cat-owning households in the U.S. would consider adopting one, an additional 6.2 million cats could be placed in loving homes, greatly reducing the number in animal shelters.

For complete results of the survey, visit morrisanimalfoundation.org/cattitudes.
Don’t Miss Animal Care Expo 2010!

It’s nearly here, and that means you’re nearly out of luck—that is, if you haven’t registered for Expo yet!

The biggest, best, and most cost-effective conference and exhibit in animal care and control is coming up May 12-15. It’s in Nashville, Tenn., this year, at the sumptuous Gaylord Opryland Resort—that’s right next door to the Grand Ole Opry, which means you should be able to catch some great country music after you’re done with the days of checking out the exhibitors, learning the latest approaches to animal protection, and networking with your colleagues from across the country and around the world.

There’s still time to register, and if you’re worried about money (who isn’t these days?), check out spaceshare.com/hsus_animal_care/. By filling out a form, you can get matched with folks to carpool, taxi-share, or room with at the conference—which will help you save your moola for important things, like the cup of coffee you’ll need to wake up early and take advantage of all the great workshops.

You shouldn’t miss the conference. Check out the details at animalsheltering.org/expo and make sure to stop by the Animal Sheltering booth at the exhibit hall to say hi!

Have an idea for a great Expo workshop?

We are accepting proposals for Expo 2011 online at animalsheltering.org/expo from May 15–July 15.

Calm the Neighbors. Keep the Cats.

Alley Cat Allies

How to Live With Cats in Your Neighborhood

How to Live with Cats in Your Neighborhood outlines easy ways to deter cats from gardens and yards. This best selling brochure is distributed to the public by animal control agencies and shelters across the country. 25 for $5. 100 for $15.

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Community relations and Trap-Neuter-Return information also available. Shop at alleycat.org/marketplace.

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Notable Numbers. Ripped from the pages of the Guinness Book of World Records: Longest kiss—31 hours, 30 minutes, 31 seconds. Loudest burp—107.1 decibels. Largest gathering of people dressed as gorillas—637. Ho-hum. For record-breaking with impact, check out the Sacramento SPCA. Its “lives saved in 2009” figures totally shredded all its previous years’ statistics. The high-volume spay/neuter clinic sterilized 16,422 animals; 6,059 pets were adopted out; 10,000 vaccinations were administered in low-cost clinics; and 1,200 sick or underage animals were cared for by dedicated foster families. And the shelter’s 1,300 volunteers voted the organization “Best Place to Volunteer” in Sacramento magazine.

Goodnight, sweet prince. The town of Newburyport, Mass., said goodbye on Dec. 9 to Zorro, a 16-year-old coal black shorthaired cat who was the last of his kin. The Newburyport News reported that Zorro was the sole remaining resident of a colony of feral cats that had once numbered about 300; his passing, while sad, is a testament to the effectiveness of a well-managed trap-neuter-return program. In 1992, a group of volunteers formed the Merrimack River Feline Rescue Society and undertook to control the colony humanely using TNR. Eighteen years later, the colony is gone, and the society has found homes for 14,600 pets, and spayed and neutered 7,700 ferals throughout Massachusetts and parts of New Hampshire. “Zorro was beautiful and a little spoiled—the volunteers gave him sardines on Sundays,” says Maryellen Madaio, MRFRS’ executive director. “We mourn his passing, but we focus on the success story that this project has been.”

Well-heeled dog is no heel. If you were a dog, and you won a million dollars, what would you do? Buy a diamond collar? Invest in hydrant-front property? When Dr. Papidies, a longhaired Chihuahua from Parker, Colo., won first prize in All American Pet Brands’ “Cutest Dog” contest, he did neither. Peoplepets.com reports that he instructed his person, dermatologist Leslie Capin, to donate it all to his brothers and sisters at two area animal shelters, the Dumb Friends League in Denver and the Max Fund. The pooch was a gift to Capin from a well-meaning friend who had unknowingly purchased him from a puppy mill; he became deathly ill within days and was diagnosed with Addison’s disease. The kennel was subsequently investigated and shut down, and Capin has become a staunch opponent of puppy mills. Now 3 years old, the pooch knows he’s one lucky dog and is thrilled to be sharing his wealth. As he “writes” on his owner’s blog, “With the downturn in our economy many of my furry friends are finding themselves homeless. I along with my Mom am passionate about helping these animals!”

Where there’s a will. Last fall, a letter arrived at the Wenatchee Valley Humane Society in Wenatchee, Wash., from a financial institution with the news that their client, 92-year-old Helen Zilke, had recently passed away and bequeathed some money to the shelter. Interim director Stephanie Manriquez sent in the required form and received a check for $87,000. A really nice windfall, especially coming from someone who had never set foot in the shelter. But it didn’t end there. Check after check arrived, totaling $340,000. Then, in January of this year, Manriquez, now the shelter’s permanent director, was called by Zilke’s attorney and told that the humane society would be receiving another $800,000. “It was stunning,” Manriquez recalls. “None of the staff had ever met her, and we knew very little about her.” She says Zilke’s daughters told her their mother adored animals and that every year at Christmas, they would drive her to the shelter to make a donation, usually about $50 or $100. But she just couldn’t bring herself to go in, finding it too upsetting to see the homeless animals. The money couldn’t have come at a better time—the society was planning a capital campaign to raise funds to replace its 1970s-era facility, which has no central heat or air conditioning, no isolation areas for sick or frightened pets, and inadequate space for cats. “We serve two counties in a rural area where the population has grown 80 percent in the last 30 years,” says Manriquez. “But our space hasn’t grown at all. We’re so thankful to Mrs. Zilke and her family.”

Help in Haiti. Jerry’s a hero, but he doesn’t care. All he wants is a toy and a pat on the head. Trained to sniff out survivors of disasters, the 3-year-old black Lab arrived in Haiti as part of the Orange County Federal Emergency Management Agency Urban Search and Rescue team after the devastating January earthquake crippled the island nation. A CNN clip shows Jerry and a canine partner racing over a rubble heap, barking whenever they sense the presence of a living human in the debris. According to the clip, the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation discovered Jerry at a shelter, where his energy level and high-strung personality had kept him from being adopted. The foundation turned those negatives into one great big pawsitive. Jerry and his fellow sniffer take 10 minutes to clear a pile of ruins that would otherwise take a team of 80 people equipped with cameras and listening equipment two hours to search. There are currently 70 SDF-trained search teams in five states and Washington, D.C., who respond to national and international requests for search assistance.

Turnabout is fair play. In 2003, Miami-Dade Animal Services was in terrible shape. Run by the police department, the unit was the subject of so many complaints that the Miami-Dade County Manager’s Office and Office of the Inspector General called The HSUS for help. Last November, the shelter and staff received three
awards from the Florida Animal Control Association for its work, including being named 2009 Animal Control Agency of the Year. The difference? An evaluation by a team of HSUS shelter services consultants, the hiring of a dedicated director, and a lot of hard work. In 2005, Sara Pizano, D.V.M., was brought on board to address the 578 recommendations made by the evaluation team. “There were thousands of animals missing, a very high disease and mortality rate in the kennels, no sanitation procedures in place,” and a 30 percent vacancy rate on the staff, says Pizano. She created a new management team, which wrote and implemented standard operating procedures for every area of the shelter and started holding people accountable. The raised standards of care as well as the establishment of a volunteer program and formal relationships with area rescue groups have greatly increased the number of animal lives saved. In 2004, the shelter adopted out 3,000 animals; in 2008-09, 8,300 found new homes, and rescue groups took another 4,000. “Knowing where we started … it’s an astonishing accomplishment and honor to get that award after four years,” Pizano says, who adds that the local community is equally excited about the recognition that the shelter has received.

Take this stamp and stick it. Who can say no to a pair of sparkling eyes in a furry face? No one we know. And that’s what the U.S. Postal Service hopes. To encourage people to consider adopting their next pet from a shelter, in April, USPS is introducing a set of first-class stamps featuring 10 irresistible shelter cats and dogs and the slogan “Animal Rescue: Adopt a Shelter Pet.” The photos were taken by photographer Sally Andersen-Bruce, who found the cuties in facilities near her home in New Milford, Conn. And, happily, all but one had been spoken for at the time they sat for their portraits. ☺️