Readin’, ‘Ritin’, and Rabbits
College combats bunny overpopulation with a TNR/adoption program
BY JAMES HETTINGER

Long Beach City College isn’t the hoppin’ place it used to be—and that’s good news.

Once, the community college south of Los Angeles teemed with hundreds of abandoned pet rabbits and their offspring. Dropping them off on campus had become a misguided local tradition dating back 30 years or more, says Jacque Olson, an administrative assistant for the dean of physical education and athletics. Local residents would typically drive into a parking lot near some bushes, open the car door, and dump out their unwanted rabbit—a practice that Olson points out is not only inhumane but against the law in California, punishable by a $500 fine and up to six months in jail.

The college traditionally receives an influx each spring shortly after Easter, Olson says. Families get a cute, cuddly bunny for the holiday and suddenly realize that rabbits require nearly as much work as a dog or cat. Children and parents quickly lose interest in cleaning the rabbit cage every day, so they opt to drop the bunnies at the college.

“They think it’s like a Disneyland for rabbits, because it’s a green campus, and there’s lots of open spaces, and they think rabbits want to run free,” Olson says. “They don’t look at it from the rabbits’ point of view—that the rabbits struggle to find shelter, and they struggle to find food, and if it weren’t for a few employees on campus putting out feeding and watering stations, those rabbits would starve to death.”

Olson began rescuing and finding new homes for the rabbits on her own about 10 years ago, but the problem persisted, reaching an estimated 300 rabbits.

“They were everywhere,” says Donna Prindle, a professor in the physical education department who started helping Olson about a year ago. An extensive renovation of the campus made the rabbits more visible to predators such as hawks and owls. It forced them out of their usual dwelling spots and into some inappropriate places, including the athletic fields. One bunny was found making her burrow behind the softball field’s home plate.

In 2009, Olson and Prindle approached the administration about finding a humane solution, and the college formed a rabbit task force. Prindle contacted the Utah-based Best Friends Animal Society, which suggested an innovative approach: a trap-neuter-return (TNR) program, similar to the strategy frequently used for feral cats.

Best Friends helped connect the college with the veterinary school at nearby Western University of Health Sciences. The Western University mobile veterinary unit, staffed by four full-time vets and about 15 student volunteers, came to Long Beach in March 2010 for a two-day spay/neuter event that resulted in sterilization surgeries for 83 rabbits rounded up largely by Olson and Prindle. “It was an incredible event because these people were so organized, and so meticulous, and so dedicated to what they were doing,” Olson says. “We just kind of stood in the background and watched it all happen.”

Diane McClure, a veterinarian and associate professor at Western University, says she savors one compliment in particular from the Long Beach City College participants. “They said, ‘We’re amazed at your students, because it was a really long day,’ and they said the last rabbit got the same care as the first rabbit.”

The team returned in May and performed surgeries on another 75 rabbits. More recently, Olson and Prindle have been gathering groups of about 10 rabbits and taking them to the university every few weeks for spay/neuter surgeries.

Debby Widolf, rabbit department manager for Best Friends and a volunteer at the college’s first spay/neuter event, says the level of organization was amazing—with
each rabbit given a physical before the surgery, and a post-surgery area where students held the bunnies on heating pads. “It was really sweet,” she says. “There wasn’t anything at all cavalier about bringing in these rabbits and caring for them and making sure that they had what they needed.”

Rabbits don’t always get that kind of respect, Widolf notes. Because they’re so plentiful, they’re often viewed as disposable, which leads to the kind of problem found at the college, and has caused them to become the third-most-euthanized animal in shelters. “Spaying and neutering is definitely one of the answers for them,” she says. “I think that when shelters offer clinics to spay and neuter dogs and cats, they just really need to include rabbits, too.”

**Trap, Neuter ... Adopt**

The ongoing construction at Long Beach City College—which is removing some of the buildings under which the rabbits lived, and paving new parking lots—makes it impossible to release all the rabbits back onto the campus, Olson explains. The college, which is replanting the landscaping the rabbits have eaten, and filling the holes they’ve dug, doesn’t really want the rabbits on campus; the facilities department redirected a $10,000 facilities improvement grant to cover spay/neuter expenses. “And we don’t really want the rabbits on campus, either, because it’s not a safe place for them,” she adds, citing the threat of predators.

So a former carpentry building on campus, stocked with cages donated by Best Friends, has been converted to a “rabbit recovery area” housing bunnies awaiting adoption. Olson says many of the rabbits—including those born on campus—never really become wild and remain highly adoptable. “They are sweet and gentle and affectionate. And because we’ve been handling them on a daily basis—we pick them up and take them out of the cage, clean their cage and put them back in, and hold them and love them—they love us. They love people.” Unlike feral cats, she adds, the rabbits are friendly and easy to handle.

To promote adoptions, the project’s organizers have placed a notice on the school’s website, asked local churches to post a flier, and worked with the Bunny Bunch, a local rescue group. Olson admits the adoptions are going slower than she’d like, but says she still has avenues to explore. The goal was to adopt out all the available rabbits by the end of 2010.

Olson and Prindle say the impact is noticeable: As of mid-September, about 140 rabbits had been adopted out, 40 had been spayed or neutered and returned to the campus, and 80 remained in the recovery center. Olson estimates that the number of unsterilized rabbits at large on campus has dwindled to 20 or 25.

A mobile veterinary unit from nearby Western University of Health Sciences has visited Long Beach City College to help spay and neuter rabbits. Faculty members or graduate veterinarians perform the surgeries, assisted by students. Working the spay/neuter event last March, left to right, are veterinary technician Luann Manley and veterinarians David Forster and Marc Togneri.
Skilled with a Scalpel

A spay/neuter veterinarian takes his commitment to ending pet homelessness to new heights

When veterinarian Don Popa picks up his surgical instruments, watch out: Any intact pets in the immediate area can rule out the prospect of parenthood.

In his battle to eliminate unwanted litters and reduce pet overpopulation, Popa, who runs the spay/neuter clinic at the Ramona Humane Society in San Jacinto, Calif., has racked up some pretty staggering numbers. He’s been known to do 60-70 spay/neuters a day, though these days he’s averaging around 40. He hit his all-time high in winter 2008, when, working out of a mobile clinic, he did 106 spay/neuters—59 dogs, 46 cats, and one rabbit.

Popa, 55, keeps meticulous records of every spay/neuter surgery he does, writing them all down in notebooks he keeps at home. His monthly goal at the clinic is 700 procedures.

On Dec. 22, 2009, Popa reached a career milestone: his 100,000th spay/neuter surgery, a feat that took him 12 years to achieve. The shelter staff had a little party for him, cake was served, and a reporter from the Riverside Press-Enterprise came and interviewed him. Even his mother, visiting from his native Romania, was there to share the moment.

“That day, when I accomplished my 100,000th surgery, I don’t know how to say this—I was on a nine cloud, if you will,” says Popa, in charmingly accented English. “I was floating, I was not walking, and glowing, I’m sure.”

It was a long journey to reach that peak. Popa, who graduated from veterinary school in Romania, defected from the then-Communist country at age 30 in 1985, exasperated with trying to treat animals without the benefit of surgical instruments or medicine. While visiting his American-born aunt in Thousand Palms, Calif., he applied for political asylum,
the first step of an exhausting process that would drag on for seven years. He worked with immigration lawyers to sort out his legal status in the United States, while taking whatever jobs he could find—such as gardening and cleaning houses.

Once he got his official work permit, Popa started out as a kennel attendant, cleaning cat cages at Animal Samaritans SPCA in Thousand Palms. There he got to know a group of veterinarians who leased the small shelter’s spay/neuter clinic at night to run an emergency clinic. They invited him to work as a technician in their separate private practices, while he learned English and looked into restarting his own veterinary career in America.

He eventually found out about an educational commission for foreign veterinary school graduates that offered a program to enable them to become veterinarians in the United States. The commission recognized his Romanian school as an accredited institution, which meant he didn’t have to start all over again. But Popa had to take three English comprehension exams, and was told he would either have to attend one year at a U.S. veterinary school, or else pass a brutal five-day exam covering all aspects of veterinary medicine. Lacking money for tuition, he chose the latter—though he was nervous about it, having been told that only about 6 percent of examinees pass. “I was thinking, ‘Oh my good Lord,’” Popa recalls, laughing. “I was so happy that I passed this exam, because this was a really, really tough one.”

He passed the test in 1992, which established him as a licensed veterinarian. In 1993, he passed the California State Veterinary Board Exam, so he could practice in that state.

Popa returned to work at the emergency clinic, and began doing relief work in its separate practices. During that time, as he was looking to adopt a kitten, Popa visited an animal shelter in Palm Springs. It was his first experience at a large-scale animal control facility, and it made a deep impression.

“We didn’t have [animal shelters] in Romania—this was a new concept, for me,
anyway. What I saw was pretty disheartening,” Popa says. “I saw all these animals, and I thought, ‘Wow, now they look like they need real help here,’ so I started asking, how can you help animals in a shelter?”

Popa heard about several for-profit and nonprofit spay/neuter programs in the area, and in addition to his other veterinary jobs, he started doing relief work for them. “I was amazed at how fast I picked that up. In a couple of months, I was able to do over 30 [spay/neuters] a day,” he says.

Then he was hired as a spay/neuter veterinarian at the Riverside County Department of Animal Services. Seeing all the sick and homeless animals, the pets who were euthanized due to a lack of adopters, weighed heavily on him. “And I thought, ‘We need to do something about this, and what I can do is my best to participate in preventing this,’” he recalls.

Popa worked at Riverside County for about five years, then was hired to run the Ramona Humane Society’s spay/neuter clinic, where he has a staff of five—two to help him in surgery, three to work with the public in the front of the clinic. He also teaches a rigorous eight-hour class to certify the shelter’s technicians in euthanasia, and he performs routine surgery on shelter animals to repair lacerations and broken bones.

The shelter’s thrilled to have such a prolific spay/neuter veterinarian on staff, accord-

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Jeff Sheppard, left, president/CEO of the Ramona Humane Society in San Jacinto, Calif., and Don Popa reassure Sam, a shelter dog who will be neutered before going home with his new owner.
For guinea pig aficionados, the morning of a big “pignic” is much like opening day for baseball fans: Even the nonreligious pray for sunshine. But while good weather helps make a pignic a success, the crucial ingredients are high spirits—and guinea pigs.

Pignics are fundraising, educational, and social events for the guinea pig set. In the Washington, D.C., area, Metropolitan Guinea Pig Rescue (MGPR) has been hosting its PIGstravaganza for five years, but it’s only one of about a dozen pignics held around the country. I’ve been attending for three years, first as a member of MGPR and now as its fundraising coordinator. The event is typically held in a park or backyard, where guinea pig lovers bring their pets and adoptable animals, set them up in pens, and watch the grass go—yes, go, right down the gullets of their hungry darlings.

The day of the 2010 PIGstravaganza in Reisterstown, Md., started off ominous, cold, and with lurking clouds. Still, optimistic attendees packed up their piggies and pens, and headed off to the park—and their high hopes paid off.

“The sun came out, and so did the people,” says Becky Wilson, a member of the MGPR board of directors. And of course, the people came bearing pigs, including many MGPR “alumni.” It made for a fond reunion, and a chance to watch the pigs play and to see how they had grown: According to Wilson, Hazel—a once infamously antisocial MGPR guinea pig—was actually trying to hop from cage to cage to meet new friends.

Pignics bring in money by celebrating all things guinea. At PIGstravaganza there’s a raffle with pig-related prizes, bake sales with pig-themed goods, and cozy supplies they can buy to pamper their pets. Special prizes are awarded to the pigs in attendance; some awards are determined by a competition (“fastest eater”) while others are based on the opinion of the judges (“biggest diva”).

Many talented people in the rescue group donate their skills. Beth Henry of MGPR owns a card and stamp company, so guinea pig cards make an appearance. Lisa Mock has a talent for sewing and donates her time and fabric to make guinea pig beds and tunnels. Some of these items are distributed through the raffle, which features botanical hays, custom Mock-made guinea pig beds, and hard-to-find specialty treats.

Wilson also mingles throughout the event with the nail trimmers, offering on-the-spot grooming services. The clipping is provided for free, but it often brings in donations. Another service provided by the rescue is properly sexing guinea pigs: Many a “Victoria” has left the pignic newly established as a “Victor.”

The event is a success partly because MGPR strikes an excellent balance of providing paid merchandise and free benefits; the mix brings in the funds while creating a fun, social atmosphere.

While most pignics don’t involve an entrance fee, holding an event that requires one isn’t out of the question. Guinea pig lovers don’t often meet many of their kind, and they’ll likely pay for the opportunity to do so. This year an attendee came all the way from New York to attend the event in Maryland.

Sally Hurley, a computer programmer by day who organized the Boston Pignic, has
more than 20 years of guinea pig experience. The Boston Pignic began in October 2003, replacing the now-defunct New England Pignic.

Tracy Patruno, who has attended the Boston and New England pignics, says the ideal event boils down to “kicking back while being surrounded by a whole bunch of cute.”

The Boston pignic certainly fits that description. About 50 guinea pigs attend. The set-up differs from PIGstravaganza: Rather than having many little pens, the guinea pigs—divided by gender—hang out together in two large pens. Sometimes that can mean that “whole bunch of cute” can turn into a rolling ball of teeth and fur. (For these feisty guineas, there is a time-out pen!)

The Boston pignic isn’t focused on fund-raising, but people do sell guinea pig goodies to benefit the rescue. Like all pignics, the benefit is mainly for the animals, says Hurley. “This [is] an opportunity to let your pigs get outside in a fairly protected area, interact with other guinea pigs, eat the grass, and have some fresh air. I know my pigs really loved it.”

Interested in starting your own pignic? “The hardest part is getting someone to actually take charge of it, and getting enough people that it feels worthwhile … and then trying to find a place to hold it,” Hurley says. A pignic location must have untreated grass—so there will be no danger of pigs getting sick from nibbling—and no nearby dogs, as well as shady spots in case the day is hot.

At the end of a typical pignic day, the sun is setting, and the eyes of many tired guinea pigs are starting to close. Their bellies are full, their nails are trimmed, and fur is soft from so much petting. While a successful pignic can bring in several hundred dollars—this year’s Pigstravaganza, for example, brought in almost $300—the best pignics are about more than money.

“We looked out at the back field,” says Wilson, “and it was just filled with pens and guinea pigs.”

To locate or advertise a pignic in your area, visit cavymadness.com/pigniccentral.html.
Late for Dinner … Luckily

A bizarre cruelty case leads to a new home for New York’s “marinated” cat

It’s an adoption counselor’s worst nightmare: The adopter who seemed perfectly nice and rational at your front desk, who took one of your animals home, turns out to be more than a little loopy. The pet you adopted is involved in a bizarre case of animal abuse, and the story is picked up by media outlets around the world.

Alice Malone, a staff member at the SPCA Serving Erie County in Tonawanda, N.Y., had to live through it.

The story started when officers Jerry Guilian and John Poisson of the Buffalo Police Department’s Mobile Response Unit made a routine traffic stop at 7:45 p.m. on Aug. 8. They pulled over a car whose driver, Cheektowaga resident Gary L. Korkuc, had failed to use his turn signal. During the stop, the officers heard a cat meowing in the car’s trunk, and they asked Korkuc to open it. Inside, they found a black-and-white cat who, according to a police report, was in a cage apparently “marinating” in a mixture of crushed red peppers, chili pepper, salt, and oil.

Police charged Korkuc with one count of aggravated cruelty to animals. Officers called the SPCA in Tonawanda—the Buffalo Police Department has a good working relationship with the shelter, which is a 15- to 20-minute drive from the site of the traffic stop. A humane officer came to transport the cat to the facility.

Korkuc has denied that he planned to eat the cat. He has also claimed that the cat was pregnant and had miscarried and was not sitting in marinade, according to a story on a local TV station’s website. (The 4-year-old cat is actually a neutered male.) Korkuc was scheduled to appear Aug. 17 in Buffalo City Court to answer the charge of animal cruelty, but failed to appear; a bench warrant was issued for his arrest.

Late for Dinner … Luckily

A bizarre cruelty case leads to a new home for New York’s “marinated” cat

BY JIM BAKER

TO THE RESCUE

SPCA Serving Erie County adoption counselor Alice Malone, left, visits Oliver in his new home, as owner Vickie Dankowski of Cheektowaga, N.Y., looks on.
Two days after the traffic stop, the bizarre story broke in the Buffalo News, soon spreading to news outlets across the country and internationally. Malone read about it in her newspaper while she was at the doctor’s office. She thought the perpetrator’s name sounded disturbingly familiar. “So [when] I came into work, I looked in the computer, and I saw that I did the adoption, and I just started crying, because I felt so bad for the kitty.” Malone says there was nothing about Korkuc during his visit to the shelter that would have tipped her off that he might pose a risk to the cat. “He was like a normal person. I was mortified when I had heard what he had done.”

Gina Browning, the SPCA’s director of public relations, remembers watching Malone as the impact of the incident hit home. When the story broke, Malone had been on vacation; she came back to work the same day the media arrived at the shelter to continue its coverage. “I happened to be standing in the adoption lobby when she first walked in ... and she looked at me, and her eyes filled up with tears. She was just so distraught over this, and she kept saying, ‘It’s my fault, it’s my fault,’” Browning recalls.

Once the cat, known as Navarro, was back at the shelter, staff members gave him three baths with special shampoo to remove all the spices and oil. “By that second day after his bath, you would think nothing happened to this poor guy. He likes to climb high in the cat playgrounds, and we would dangle the feathers for him to go after,” Browning says.

Meanwhile, Browning fielded at least a dozen calls from people wanting to learn more about the cat or wanting to adopt him—including one from a woman in Kansas who was ready to fly in and pick him up. She spoke to media people from as far away as Ireland, Australia, and Japan.

Vickie Dankowski, a Cheektowaga resident, read about Navarro’s ordeal in the newspaper. The story shocked her; she wondered about what the cat might have gone through during his three months with Korkuc before ending up in a car trunk. She’d been thinking of getting another cat, as her 15-year-old domestic shorthair, Tigger Marie, had died of cancer several months before, and she wanted to adopt a second cat as a companion for her other kitty, Annabelle.

Dankowski came to the SPCA later that same day. Another woman was already preparing to adopt the cat, but the two of them talked it over. “So she said to me, ‘Did you give it a name yet?’ I said, ‘I have a name all picked out. His name is Oliver.’ And she just hugged me, and she said, ‘You know what? You should take the cat,’” she recalls.

Dankowski came back that evening, completed the adoption paperwork, and then took the newly named Oliver home.

The painful experience hasn’t changed the way Malone feels about her job. “I just cringe at the thought of what would have happened to this poor little kitty. I was devastated for a while,” she says. “Of course I’m going to be emotional and be upset, but then again, looking back at it, I didn’t do anything different than I would do today.”

And while the incident was extremely disturbing, it won’t result in any changes to the SPCA’s adoption policies, says executive director Barbara Carr, noting that it would be a mistake for the shelter to overreact to an isolated instance, stiffen its adoption policies, and cost many pets a chance to find homes.

“What do you think we should do: Make sure everyone sees a psychiatrist before they come to us, and bring a note?” says Carr.

Browning says the shelter followed appropriate procedures in Korkuc’s case. There was nothing about him that would have tipped her off that he might pose a risk to the cat. “He was like a normal person. I was mortified when I had heard what he had done.”

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Wallace Sife has built a figurative lifeboat—one that may help anyone who’s coping with the death of a pet.

A retired psychologist in Brooklyn, N.Y., Sife found himself devastated in 1987 after the death of his dachshund, Edel Meister. His training as a mental health professional hadn’t prepared him for the grief, and his search for literature on the topic was geared toward pet owners proved fruitless. So he wrote his own book: The Loss of a Pet: A Guide to Coping with the Grieving Process When a Pet Dies. In 1997 he went a step further, founding the Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement (APLB), a nearly all-volunteer nonprofit that serves as a clearinghouse for pet bereavement information, while also offering online chat rooms and training for pet bereavement counselors.

In the interview excerpted below, Sife discusses the APLB’s founding and purpose with Animal Sheltering associate editor James Hettinger.

Animal Sheltering: How did you come to found the Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement?

Well, I lost my own pet quite a few years ago, quite unexpectedly. He was quite young … and he was a champion. We were returning home from a show where he just took another blue ribbon, and he started huffing and puffing. It turned out he had congestive heart failure, and probably had no more than three weeks. Which was right on—[at] exactly three weeks, he died. And I was an emotional basket case. Here, of course, I was a retired psychologist with two Ph.D.s in psychology, a professor of psychology, and there was nobody available, at that time, to help me. There were three books written on the subject, none of them written for the pet owner. They were quasi-scholarly works saying that this is a valid subject, and more should be done on it.

So after going through all this and trying to research the literature with great frustration, I finally ended up writing the book I would have wanted for myself.

I understand the book has done very well? It’s gone through several printings?

It’s to its third printing now. After the second printing, I was giving a lecture and book signing at Barnes and Noble in Manhattan, and a lot of people came up to me and said, “You’re in New York, we’re in New York. Why don’t you form a group?” So I did. I founded the APLB, and we started off slowly. Less than a year later—I knew nothing about the Internet; I didn’t even know what e-mail was—I said we’ve got to go online, so I taught myself everything. The first chat room, I used to sit and play computer games just to keep myself busy, while waiting for somebody to come in. Now, we’ve got five [chat rooms]. I’ve started training assistants, and I’ve created a training course for counselors … because a lot of people were calling themselves counselors, and they would counsel you with crystals and aromatherapy. I mean, there were a lot of crazies out there, and people were falling for it. I decided I had to legitimize all this and set standards, so I just started teaching.

Generally speaking, what have you found that people need when they lose a pet? What are they looking for?

Validation. That’s the first thing. Because today, most people say, “It’s only a dog. It’s only a cat. Get over it already. What’s wrong with you?”

When they bond very strongly with a particular pet, then the bereavement is that much more intensified. And I have a lot of people coming to me saying, “What’s wrong with me? I’m grieving more for my cat than I did for my father. And my family is giving me all kinds of hell for it.” I say, “No, you’re not grieving more; you’re grieving differently. Your relationship was different.”

I assume that a lot of adults see their pets every day. They don’t necessarily see their parents every day.

And a lot of people talk to their pets as if they were their children, and treat them [as such]. In many ways they are our children, because we have to provide everything for them, and care for them, and watch over them. They can’t talk, so we have to be super-cautious just making sure that everything’s OK. There’s a feedback—a caretaking feedback, it’s called—and we become very intensely bonded. Then when the pet dies, [people think], “My God, maybe there’s something I could have done that I didn’t.” Or, “Where did I miss out?” There’s a lot of guilt for a while—that’s one of the stages.

How can people who run animal shelters and rescue groups benefit from the kind of services you’re offering?

Well, these people become bonded also in certain ways to the animals they’re dealing with. And if they have to be euthanized, or even if they get adopted after they’ve attached to them, there’s a sense of loss. We’ve worked with people in wildlife management also. They love the animals, but they have to release them, and then there’s always this sense of sadness as well as joy.

Is operating the APLB gratifying work?

Oh, extremely, because—as opposed to other kinds of psychology—if done right, a pet bereavement counselor can [get] very fast results. Very fast—even in the course of one chat room. In my Friday night chat rooms … in the last half hour, [we have a regular feature where we] share loving memories of our pets. And I have a few pivotal questions, because it’s not something you get into easily: “Who had a pet duck? Who had a special toy that most other pets wouldn’t have? Whose pet liked to sleep in unusual places?” And it brings them out, and pretty soon they’re recalling. I say, “Did you ever have an article of ‘people food’ suddenly disappear with a pet looking so innocent nearby?” … It draws them out. And at the end of the chat room, they’re falling all over each other trying to tell the stories. People tell me, “I never dreamed I’d be able to smile. My pet just died two days ago. I came in here in tears, and you’ve got me smiling.” That’s getting into the healing process.
You might think I would have been better-prepared. I chose to foster Samantha Jane—a 7-year-old Chihuahua diagnosed with late-stage lymphoma, who had been undergoing chemotherapy treatments at the private, nonprofit animal shelter where I worked. Eventually I chose to end her suffering … which resulted in the beginning of my own.

For almost a full year, Samantha Jane had flourished in our home. Between arduous biweekly chemotherapy treatments at a specialty animal hospital on Long Island, she lived a fun-filled and happy life. Although the chemo took its toll, our top priority was the maintenance of the quality of her life. Weekly trips to the beach, daily belly rubs, countless treats, and limitless love secured trust and formed bonds, taking the edge off her illness. For a short time, we were able to forget that she was so ill. After a happy Christmas together, her immune system, ravaged by disease, continued to betray her small body. The choice was clear.

On the day of her euthanasia, the skies turned gray, and a storm rolled in off the sea. The ferocity of the rain matched that of my tears as we drove to the oncologist. There we said goodbye, grateful that her last breath could take place in my arms as he administered the drug. And although she had been sick for a long time, the loss left me ill-equipped to manage the tumult that followed.

The empathy and validation one receives after the traumatic death of a pet is crucial to the healing process. Too often, when an animal passes away it can be difficult to find the compassion and understanding one would encounter when losing a human companion. Because of this lack of resources, countless pet mourners run the risk of alienation, isolation, and unresolved pain. Fortunately for me, in my pursuit of guidance from skilled professionals, I happened upon the Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement (APLB).

Psychologist Wallace Sife founded the organization, setting out to serve the community of people mourning the death of their companion animals. When I visited the group’s website (aplb.org), I found uplifting testimonials and memorials for countless pets who are missed each day. Immediately, I was drawn into the sense of kinship created by the gentle understanding of raw bereavement. I found myself exploring the services offered, the experiences of others, and the photos of numerous pets whose memories are honored with the sincerity and understanding I had been searching for.

I had been working in the animal welfare field for some time when I lost Samantha Jane. Yet even in my world of people who deeply value animals, I was not immediately able to find resources to help me cope with the loss. While most shelters and rescue organizations may be unable to provide counseling services to grieving pet owners, my experience suggests that animal welfare groups should at least be aware of appropriate resources to suggest to those dealing with the loss of a pet. As organizations devoted to the idea that a pet is part of the family, we should be prepared to help people with their grief when they lose a member of their closest circle.

Shortly after Samantha Jane died, a friend who meant well offered her advice, suggesting I put any pictures of Sam away for a while so that I wouldn’t see them and be reminded of my pain. What she couldn’t understand was my need to continue to “see” Sam and grieve for her in the way that she truly deserved. It was through her absence that I came to appreciate just how profound her presence had been. I wanted to cry for her, to be reminded of the time we shared and the impact we had on each other. And although the process of grief is uncomfortable, both for the person going through it and for those who bear witness to it, Samantha Jane is worth every tear I shed even now, when I remember her fondly and miss her still.

Erica Settino has worked in animal welfare and advocacy for more than eight years. She is the co-founder and director of Karuna for Animals: Compassion In Action Inc., and author of the children’s book I Am Everything And Everything Is Me (set for release in early 2011). She lives in Huntington, N.Y., with her husband and four animal companions. More information can be found at karunaforanimals.com, and her writing can be found at esettino.weebly.com.
Necessity, they say, is the mother of invention, and the chaos that followed Hurricane Katrina gave birth to many unexpected partnerships. Some dissolved as a semblance of order returned to the Gulf Coast, but others—like that between The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and a medium-security prison in Louisiana—have grown into beautiful friendships.

In the days and weeks after the 2005 storm, The HSUS’s temporary shelter for animals at the Lamar-Dixon Expo Center in Gonzales, La., filled up with strays and pets rescued from the flooded region. Animals kept coming in, though, and finding suitable shelters—in an area whose animal facilities had been severely impacted by the storm—became a major challenge.

That’s when Amanda Smith, a prison administration staff member at the Dixon Correctional Institute (DCI), happened to read a newspaper article about the sheltering needs at Lamar-Dixon, and asked then-warden James “Jimmy” LeBlanc if the prison could help by fostering displaced animals on prison property, which includes 2,500 acres of land and several barns.

LeBlanc, now secretary of Louisiana’s Department of Public Safety and Corrections, liked the idea and started talks with the department and The HSUS. Within weeks, 150 dogs and 52 chickens, ducks, and geese rescued from the New Orleans area were on their way to a converted dairy barn on prison property. Eric Davis, director of field services for the Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association, assembled a team of volunteers to transport the animals to DCI, where a team of two correctional officers from the prison’s canine unit and 10 inmates helped with unloading and setup.

During the next three weeks, 45 cats and another 20 dogs were added to the temporary shelter. Volunteers and inmates fed and watered all the animals, cleaned their cages, and spent time walking the dogs, many of whom were high-energy pit bulls. “These [inmates] would go out there and play Frisbee with them for hours … walk them, and take care of them, and fuss with them. The inmates were just great,” Davis says.

Some of them would keep working with the dogs, even after their shift was over. “A lot of guys really enjoyed it. They said, ‘If you ever get dogs, I want to work with them again!’ They didn’t care how many hours they worked out there at that old barn; they just love animals,” recalls warden Steve Rader.

Those were the humble beginnings of a project that’s now benefiting the prison’s inmates, animals, and East Feliciana Parish (where the prison is located), which has no animal control department or shelter of its own.

Thanks to a $600,000 grant from The HSUS, and cooperation from the Louisiana State University (LSU) School of Veterinary Medicine, Dixon Correctional Institute is now the site of an emergency evacuation facility and a newly completed animal shelter, with a fully equipped surgical suite, that will serve as the parish’s holding facility for strays. The
ing after them, even though they’re wearing prison uniforms. “They don’t care that he’s got a number,” Rader says.

The experience of walking a dog can bring joy and a sense of connection. Maybe that’s because the dogs don’t judge the men looking after them, even though they’re wearing prison uniforms. “They don’t care that he’s got a number,” Rader says.

Both structures are located inside the prison’s secure perimeter. Not only did prisoners provide the labor to build them—they’ll also be caring for the animals housed there, cleaning cages and kennels, walking dogs, feeding and grooming the animals, and giving them all some much-needed TLC.

Inmates will staff the 9,375-square-foot emergency shelter—a covered, open-air barn with a capacity of about 300 kennels—in the event of a disaster, when animals can be housed temporarily. The structure, finished in spring 2008, was already put to use, when Hurricane Gustav struck the region that fall. Thirty-three dogs and 39 cats were evacuated from the LaFourche Parish Animal Shelter in Thibodaux and transported to the brand-new emergency shelter at the prison, where inmates bathed and walked dogs, changed kitty litter, and cleaned kennels during the three days the animals stayed in the shelter.

The animal shelter is run jointly by the prison and the LSU veterinary school. Under faculty supervision, students in the school’s HSUS-funded shelter medicine program perform spay/neuter surgeries and provide medical care for the shelter’s animals.

One correctional officer supervises the shelter, which is staffed by six inmates who were carefully chosen based on their records. “We wanted to get guys that want to do right and want to give back, and we were able to find some good guys that fit the bill,” Rader says.

The inmates will benefit from the work as much as the animals will, according to Deb Parsons-Drake, senior director of animal care centers for The HSUS. “[Prison officials] are providing skills to these people, so that when they do get released, they have had 10, 15 years of on-the-job training,” she says. “It is a perk, and the prisoners are vying for it, because they have learned how much animal interaction provides comfort, and chills them out, and helps them deal with whatever the problems are that put them in prison in the first place.”

The presence of animals at Dixon Correctional Institute has proved to be good for the morale of the prison, renewing the spirits of those offenders who don’t get involved in other programs and activities. Just
A New Vision from SAWA

BY MAURINE DYER STEVENS, PRESIDENT AND CEO

In 1970, dedicated leaders in animal welfare, care, and control created the Society of Animal Welfare Administrators (SAWA), with the goal of supporting professionals in the field through a variety of programs and services.

Throughout our 40 years of work, we’ve provided peer-to-peer networking and educational opportunities for people in the animal welfare field, working to help animal care professionals grow, learn, and excel in this difficult and rewarding work. We’ve conducted a biennial study on compensation and benefits, which reports data for turnover rates, Asilomar Accords records, website traffic, personnel practices, and operational issues providing information critical for leadership decision making. We developed the process allowing those in the field to become certified animal welfare administrators (CAWAs), a qualification that—due to the rigorous test required for certification—ensures that those who’ve earned the title are truly leaders and professionals in the field.

Over the past year we’ve been reexamining and strengthening our mission, working to ensure that we’re providing a vision that can help lead the field into the challenges of the work as it is now. The days of the “dogcatcher” are long gone, and we want to ensure that the people leading animal shelters and animal care and control agencies are prepared for the challenges of our particular time. SAWA represents leaders committed to excellence—in fact, that’s our new tagline!—who advocate humane ideals through professional advancement, dedication, and best practices. In 2010, our membership grew to more than 620 professional leaders.

As you can see, SAWA has a new, modern brand that reflects our forward-looking, inclusive nature—and we’re excited about what the new brand says about our direction. The shapes represent “S” for SAWA and incorporate the textures of animals; they even resemble animal tails. The dual forms represent humans and animals, side by side, working together in harmony, and the curves suggest movement and energy—only too appropriate, as SAWA continues to grow.

Even with this design transformation, our objectives remain the same:

■ To promote the sharing of information among and within animal welfare and animal care and control agencies.
■ To enhance the positive and professional image of animal welfare and animal care and control agencies.
■ To provide educational opportunities for members.

A series of articles written by SAWA experts will be appearing in future issues of Animal Sheltering. We will feature information on best practices, leadership tips, lessons learned from research, and ideas for your toolkit aimed at saving lives and building animal-friendly communities.

We hope you enjoy this new department and that you’ll become part of the solution by joining SAWA (SAWAnetwork.org). Let us hear from you at membership@sawanetwork.org.
Paw prints. The sultry month of August is referred to as “dog days,” but at the Oregon Humane Society last summer it was cats who took center stage at “Furs Thursday,” an art event featuring colorful works created by shelter cats Pablo Purrcasso, Jackson Pawlock, Andy Furhol, and several other gifted felines. The event was inspired by Portland’s monthly “First Thursday,” when art galleries in the city’s trendy Pearl District hold open houses in the evening. A designer carpet gallery in the district hosted the cats’ show, where visitors could acquire not just an original work of art, but the artist as well. The pieces were created by dipping the cats’ paws in “paint” made of milk, cornstarch, tuna water, and food coloring and placing them on a canvas. “Sometimes they would … do a nice walk across. Other times it was a bit more abstract, kind of swishes in abstract shapes,” says David Lytle, public affairs manager for OHS. The sale of the artwork, supplemented by cat-themed paintings by human artists, raised $500, but more importantly, three cats were adopted that evening, including an 11-year-old female who’d been waiting almost two months for a new home.

It’s a jungle out there. Chicago is not what you’d call tropical, but that didn’t stop a couple of alligators from making themselves at home in the Chicago River last summer. A volunteer with the Chicago Herpetological Society who goes by Alligator Bob was called out twice in August to capture two young American alligators spotted catching some rays on the riverbank. The herpetological society arranged for the rescued reptiles to be transported to sanctuaries in Florida. Bob told the Chicago Tribune that catching alligators has become something of a summer ritual for him—he’s rescued more than 70 gators from Wisconsin and Illinois rivers in his 20 years as a volunteer for the society. People frequently wait until warm weather to release animals that have grown too large for them to handle, unconcerned about what will happen to them when winter arrives. “Nothing good would have come from … being in the river,” says Cherie Travis, an attorney and executive director of Chicago Animal Care and Control. It’s illegal to own an alligator under the Illinois Dangerous Animal Act, and it’s also a crime to simply abandon an animal. “… I’m willing to forgive you for … obtaining an animal improperly,” she says. “[B]ut you can’t just turn it loose.”

No bee left behind. Dogs are notorious for eating far more than just their food. Delectable tidbits include socks, rocks, carpeting, chew toys, Halloween candy, shoes, underwear, and contents of the cat litter box. The list is endless, and many of the items pet owners are finding in the animal hospital.

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assisted experiments designed to see if the presence of a pooch could help you get what you want. Two experiments involved asking strangers for money to catch a bus, another tested strangers’ helpfulness in picking up dropped coins, and one measured a man’s success in getting telephone numbers from women. In all four studies, people were more responsive if the requester was accompanied by a dog. Example: A man with a dog was able to obtain phone numbers from 34 out of 120 women approached; the same man without a dog was only able to cadge 11 numbers. Now, won’t that sound good on a cage card—housebroken, good with kids, attracts women!

Karen Linn of Belleville, Ill., who assumed that her husband had picked up the cash she’d left on the kitchen counter, wasn’t surprised to learn that her Labradoodle Fossie had actually eaten it (the 3-year-old pooch scarfed down a bra several months before), but she was astonished to get the cash back from Wilson, freshly cleaned at that. Linn was able to redeem $28 worth of the pieces of the bills at the bank; the rest was too shredded to be replaced. So she decided to put the remnants to work in another manner—after the story attracted worldwide media attention, she auctioned them off on eBay and donated the $30 proceeds to The Humane Society of the United States.

Chick magnet. Who needs match.com? A 2008 study published in Anthrozoös by French social psychologist Nicolas Guegen found that dogs can be just as effective as a matchmaking service at getting dates for men. Guegen and colleague Serge Cicotti tested the “dog effect” in four canine-assisted experiments designed to see if the presence of a pooch could help you get what you want. Two experiments involved asking strangers for money to catch a bus, another tested strangers’ helpfulness in picking up dropped coins, and one measured a man’s success in getting telephone numbers from women. In all four studies, people were more responsive if the requester was accompanied by a dog. Example: A man with a dog was able to obtain phone numbers from 34 out of 120 women approached; the same man without a dog was only able to cadge 11 numbers. Now, won’t that sound good on a cage card—housebroken, good with kids, attracts women!