



**HELLO**

would you please take me home?

*I will love you  
unconditionally*

# Here FOR A Reason

One dog's story should remind us to rally around all homeless animals, not just the ones with dramatic backgrounds

by **CARRIE ALLAN**  
shelter photos by **MICHELLE RILEY**

**I**n Sulphur, Okla., last February, a puppy seemingly came back from the dead.

In doing so, he joined the ranks of the many animals who've briefly captured the public's hearts after a dramatic rescue or a harrowing case of abuse. You've probably heard these stories: a cat thrown out a window by a vindictive boyfriend. A dog dragged behind a truck, nursed back to health by caring clinic workers.

And every now and then—as in Sulphur—the drama starts at a shelter, when an animal survives a botched euthanasia.

These stories make shelter directors cringe, primarily at the thought of the animal's suffering. They cringe, too, because the event typically means someone screwed up. Somewhere, a procedure wasn't followed, and an animal experienced trauma and possibly pain.

And with any dramatic survival story, there's publicity that, for shelter staff, can often seem like a mixed blessing.

With a little exposure, an animal who's lived through a dramatic ordeal will almost certainly find a home. In the age of Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, these animals—the cat found alive in a malfunctioning gas chamber, the dog who survives being set on fire—often hit the Internet and the media with the force of myth. They become celebrated icons of an indomitable will to survive, generating the kind of passion to adopt that shelter staff can usually only dream of gleaning for their animals.

In the Sulphur case, animal control officer Scott Prall found a litter of puppies left in a pen outside the shed serving as the local animal shelter. They were underweight and looked sickly, and Prall was concerned about infecting the 18 dogs already being held in the shelter's 10 cages; in many shelters with limited resources, an outbreak can ruin the chances of adoption for all the animals. With approval from Prall's supervisor, the vet who works with the shelter came out to put the sick dogs to sleep along with one larger dog who'd been there for a long time. He checked their hearts and verified that all were dead.

"We don't have any other place to put them, so they went into

the dumpster, and the dumpster was supposed to be offloaded the next morning," says Prall.

It was cold that night, in the 30s. But the next morning, when Prall checked to make sure the dumpster had been emptied, it hadn't. "The dogs were still in there, and the baby dog was on top of the larger dog, just staring up at me," he says.

## MIRACLE DOG

A checkup by the vet found the puppy to be wormy but otherwise healthy. Amanda Kloski, a kennel tech at the vet's office who'd been promoting adoptions at the shelter, heard about what had happened and was determined to save the puppy. Kloski took him in, nicknamed him "Miracle Dog," and began working with the small network of local animal lovers to try to get him adopted.

One of those people was Lorinda Mills, who'd been helping a shelter in nearby Davis, Okla. Mills and her daughter Michelle frequently take shelter animals to the local grocery store, hoping to connect them with adopters. Mills agreed to stay with the puppy at the store while Kloski ran some errands; she hoped he'd find a home that day.

"We pray for all the pets that we do this for," says Mills. "We don't know whether this one is destined to find a home and this one isn't, but we pray anyway. And Michelle was holding the puppy and ... we had a little silent prayer for him, and Michelle said, 'Mom, I think this dog looks like a Wall-E dog.'" Both Mills and Kloski liked the name, taken from the Pixar movie about a little robot who's the last of his kind.

He didn't get adopted that day, but Mills recalls telling her daughter that she thought he would find a home—because he had such a great story.

Sure enough, soon after that, Kloski created a listing for Wall-E on Petfinder.com. An animal lover in Pittsburgh saw the post and started a Facebook page for the puppy. Then came the YouTube videos and the news coverage, and applications to adopt the seemingly resurrected puppy poured in from around the country. At press time, Kloski had finally selected a family for Wall-E

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after wading through thousands of applications. She had finalists in Arizona, New York, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut. One person applied from France.

He “may be the luckiest dog ever,” said a reporter for *Good Morning America*.

Kloski has told several reporters that she thinks Wall-E is here for a reason. And perhaps he is. He’s an adorable, friendly pooch, romping around in the videos that went viral on the Internet.

But while he may be the lone survivor of his litter, he is *not* the last of his kind.

#### BITTERSWEET PUBLICITY

For every “miracle dog” like Wall-E, thousands of animals are still coming into animal shelters, and many of them never leave. For every dramatic story that catches the eye of the media and the hearts of the public, there are thousands of others whose less dramatic, less “sexy” circumstances meet with ugly reality: high numbers of homeless animals already in the shelter, a failure to connect with potential adopters walking by the kennels, a lack of community resources devoted to fostering programs and adoption promotions, a lingering bias against shelter animals, or any number of other setbacks.

Kloski knows this all too well. While she was amazed and inspired by the interest in Wall-E, she says some applicants were impatient about how long the selection process took. “So I put some things online saying, ‘If you want a dog right away, we have all these other dogs that don’t have even one person interested, and you could adopt them right away,’” she says.

She thinks, especially, of a dog named Sammy, a shepherd mix who was scheduled to be euthanized at the Sulphur shelter.

“She had been there for about a month and a half, and I kept trying to get her adopted. They ended up euthanizing another dog, so she got her second chance—not as dramatically as Wall-E, but it was a second chance,” says Kloski. “But I still couldn’t get her placed, and she ended up getting euthanized anyway. And, man, I wish her Petfinder site had taken off in the same way.”

It is dogs like Wall-E who make the news and serve to remind us of the plight of homeless animals. But it is dogs like Sammy who represent the majority of shelter pets in America.

They are the animals whose owners never threw them off a rooftop, who were never set on fire, who aren’t suffering from an aggressive cancer, who didn’t wake from a botched euthanasia to strike an emotional chord with fickle two-legged creatures who bore easily but love a great story.

They are the nice cats, given up because their owners moved and couldn’t find pet-friendly





Can you see how special I am?



My story has not yet been told.



housing. They are the slightly rambunctious dogs who couldn't adjust to life around kids, and the accidental litter of kittens out of which only one was wanted.

And while we understandably rally around inspiring, high-drama rescues and survival stories, it is mostly these "average" animals who continue to die in overwhelmed and underfunded animal shelters.

Weren't they "here for a reason," too?

Since Wall-E woke up last February, hundreds of thousands of animals have been euthanized at shelters around the country. Beyond some caring shelter staff and volunteers, no one will ever remember their names—because we as a society continue to generate more homeless animals than we adopt. Because, in many places, shelter services are still the last community resource to get funded and the first to be put on the chopping block. Because the animals didn't have a dramatic enough story, and so went to their deaths unnoticed and unclaimed.

### THE HUMAN LOVE OF DRAMA

Of course, it's only human to connect to a dramatic story, and shelters and rescues can sometimes use these stories to steer visitors hoping to adopt the latest celebrity pet toward those animals with less dramatic—or simply unknown—personal histories.

In a 2009 interview with The HSUS's *Animal Sheltering* magazine, Mike Arms, president of the Helen Woodward Animal Center, discussed a case at one of his former shelters: A mama cat had come in badly burned, and the publicity around the case had resulted in a "run" on her kittens. "We ended up adopting out close to 200 kittens because everyone came to the facility with the intent of taking home one of these highly publicized kittens," Arms said. "When people came in asking for these kittens, we just sent them to the kitten room. So many people left the facility believing they adopted one of Scarlett's kittens."

Deceptive? Maybe. Lifesaving? Certainly. Shelters that take in an animal with a dramatic tale would do well to learn how to use their singular stories for the good of the many.

But for all their necessity, these ways of turning the human love of drama into homes for more animals are still *reactive* solutions. They occur once the animals are already in trouble, already homeless, already in a shelter.

They don't get at the root cause. Animal welfare groups can't forever be playing catch-up, hurling thousands of pounds of cure at a problem communities should be working to prevent.

When we say that Wall-E is "here for a reason," we're thinking primarily of his survival of the euthanasia drugs pumped into his tiny system.

## Creating Safety Nets

**The HSUS believes** that every community deserves a great animal shelter, and we help shelters work better and smarter to save animals' lives.

But we also believe that animal homelessness and suffering cannot be solved by shelters alone. Though they play a critical role, they are a reactive solution to a community problem that needs intervention at earlier stages—before pets become homeless.

At The HSUS, we're working to reduce

the problems that create pet overpopulation and threaten the human-animal bond. In the Gulf Coast, our spay/neuter messaging is reaching people in rural and poor areas, demonstrating the connection between unsterilized pets and high euthanasia rates. In major cities across the country, our advocates provide spay/neuter resources and redirect kids away from dogfighting. In New York, our Pets for Life NYC staff help people in crisis hold on to their pets and mentor groups in

other communities in doing the same.

This work is based on our understanding that where there is a lack of resources and education, where there is human suffering, there is animal suffering. Our experience has shown us that when we extend our compassion to people, when we share critical information about animal care and welfare, we can change the lives of humans and animals alike.

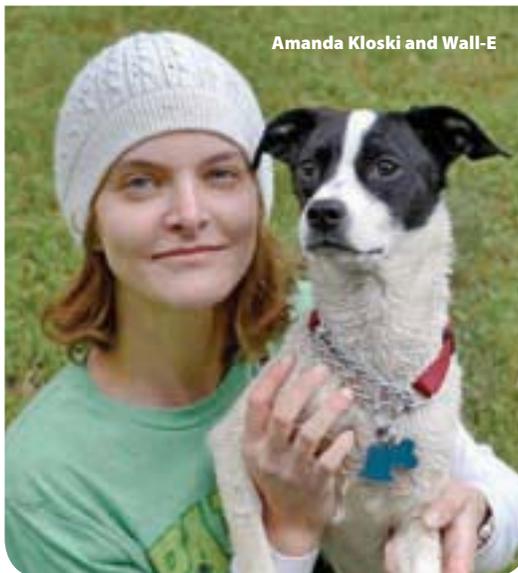
▲ LEARN MORE at [humanesociety.org/bhc](http://humanesociety.org/bhc).

But what about the reason he was “here” in the first place?

Remember: Wall-E had litter-mates. All of them, too, were euthanized; none of them woke up. All of them, too, were here for a reason: Someone, likely with no ill intentions, allowed their dog to breed, couldn’t care for the pups, and abandoned them at an already overcrowded, overwhelmed animal shelter. A shelter where Scott Prall, the lone animal control officer for Sulphur, will see intake pick up steadily during the summer months. Where he handles not only field services but the care and feeding of all the dogs at the shelter. Currently, he says, even though “cats are overrunning this town,” animal control can’t even handle them unless there’s an aggressive one attacking people in the community.

He’s hopeful that the coming years will see a larger shelter built, one that the cities of Sulphur and Davis will share. In the meantime, he has help promoting adoptions from Kloski and the little network of animal lovers that seems to exist in every town—the people who are often one of the few sources of hope for animals in municipalities overwhelmed by budget challenges or outdated attitudes toward animal welfare.

Kloski has a passion to make a difference, but even she admits that it’s a hard slog dealing with the never-ending stream. “We got almost everybody placed last week. I was so happy—we had two dogs left,” she says. “Then Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday we got



Amanda Kloski and Wall-E

18 dogs in. ... And I was so mad. And it’s because of lack of spay/neuter; people don’t do it. A lot of animals get sick and then [people] dump them because they didn’t vaccinate them. And had Wall-E not been dumped in the first place, he would never have been put in that situation. So that’s where I get upset.”

If Wall-E is here for a reason, let it be this: to remind us that it’s not just the rare and horrible cases—the feline burn victim, the canine Lazarus—who deserve attention and dedication.

We’re here, too, for the Sammys—the good dogs and calm kitties who can’t help the fact that they arrived in a shelter’s care not by way of a psychotic abuser or a terrible house fire, but via plain old boring lack of resources, human failings, and unfortunate circumstances: a lost job; a messy divorce; an *I’ll-get-to-it-later* approach to spay/neuter that often boils down to simple, tragic laziness.

These problems may not have the “pop” to make the nightly news and circle the world on YouTube, but they make up a good part of the way we live—and the way our communities’ animals die.

Providing resources and finding ways to address them must be our goal.

We, too, are here for a reason. ■

► **CARRIE ALLAN** is the editor of *The HSUS’s Animal Sheltering* magazine.



We're waiting for a second chance.

**Adopt** YOUR NEXT **PET**

A photograph of two grey tabby kittens sitting on a dark grey couch. One kitten is looking directly at the camera, while the other is looking slightly to the side. A thought bubble with a black outline and white background is positioned above the kitten on the right, containing the text "We're waiting for a second chance." Below the kittens, the text "Adopt YOUR NEXT PET" is written in a bold, white, sans-serif font. "Adopt" is the largest word, with "YOUR NEXT" in smaller letters to its right, and "PET" is the largest word below that.

**While every shelter** animal deserves a loving home, not all animal shelters are created equal.

Most local humane societies, SPCAs, and shelters are terrific places run by smart, forward-thinking animal lovers. They have good funding and strong community support. But others struggle—due to lack of funds and community support, or just outdated thinking—to provide the care and housing that animals need.

We hope that your local shelter is the progressive, caring place that most others are. But if you’re ever concerned about conditions at your local shelter, remember: There may be something you can do to help! Bring your concerns to the shelter director, volunteer your time, or talk to local officials about the needs of the shelter and animals in your community. Consider donating money, pet food, or other supplies to help your shelter help more animals.

And remember: A less-than-great animal shelter is still full of great pets. Adopt your next pet and be part of the solution.

► **LEARN** how you can help at [humanesociety.org/helpshelter](http://humanesociety.org/helpshelter).

TOP: GAVIN KLOSKI