

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



The pup known as Wall-E was abandoned with his littermates at a tiny Oklahoma shelter. The litter was euthanized, but Wall-E survived and was found in a Dumpster the next day. Local animal rescuer Amanda Kloski took the pup in, publicized his story, and found him a home. That's one happy ending. ... Now, how to make more of them?

In 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 know 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 particular 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 had a traumatic and possibly painful experience. Then, of course, there's the publicity, which can be a mixed blessing.

With a little publicity, an animal who's lived through a dramatic ordeal will almost certainly find a home. In this age of Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, these animals—the cat found yowling in a malfunctioning gas chamber, the dog who survives having been set on fire—often hit the Internet and 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 one of the pens outside the shed that serves 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. With approval from his supervisor, Prall contacted the vet who works with the shelter, who came out to put them to sleep. The litter was euthanized along with one larger dog who'd been at the shelter for a long time; the veterinarian 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.

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

Miracle Dog

The puppy went back to the vet's office, and the veterinarian checked him out. He was 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 working with 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 an adopter. Mills agreed to hold the puppy at the grocery 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 got Wall-E on Petfinder. An animal lover in Pittsburgh saw the post and started a Facebook page for the puppy. Then came 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 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*, which covered the story.

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, hundreds 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 surrender numbers, bad luck, a failure to connect with a potential adopter, a lack of good foster and rescue collaborations, poor adoption promotions, a lingering bias against shelter animals, or any number of other setbacks.

Kloski knows this all too well. While she's been amazed and inspired by the interest in Wall-E, she says some applicants have been impatient about how long the process is taking. "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.

lessons from Wall-E

While thousands applied to adopt Wall-E, other dogs at the tiny shelter in Sulphur waited for just one person to show interest. The stray dog problem in the area is significant, according to Amanda Kloski, and the shelter is overwhelmed. Local animal lovers are trying to raise money for a better facility.



THIS PAGE, PHOTO: AMANDA KLOSKI; ART: RON BURNS. OPPOSITE: AMANDA KLOSKI

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. But it is dogs like Sammy who represent the vast majority of the 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 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?



Artist Ron Burns was inspired to paint the pup, and is selling prints of his portrait; 40 percent of the profits will go toward the construction of a new shelter for Murray County, where Wall-E and his littermates were abandoned.

Since Wall-E woke up, hundreds 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 some places, shelters and rescues continue to battle and snipe at each other rather than collaborating to save more lives. 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 who arrive hoping to adopt the latest celebrity toward pets with less dramatic—or simply unknown—personal histories.

In a 2009 interview with *Animal Sheltering*, Mike Arms, president of the Helen Woodward Animal Center, discussed a case at one of his former shelters: A pregnant 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 those 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.

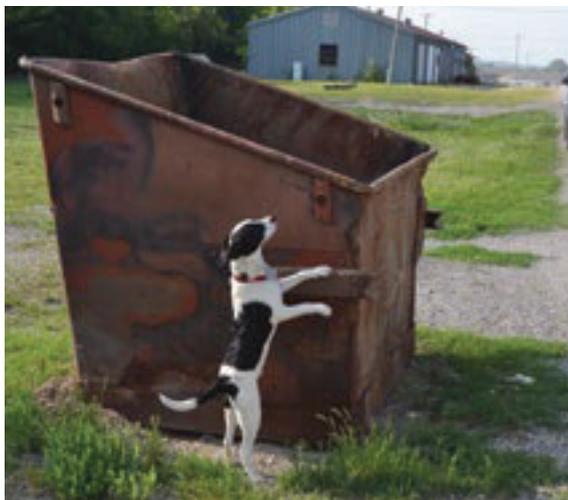
They don't get at the root cause. Animal welfare groups can't forever be playing catch-up, hurling thousands of pounds of cure at a problem communities need to prevent.

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.

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

Remember: Wall-E had littermates. 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 not only handles 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.



A healthy, soon-to-be-adopted Wall-E revisits the Dumpster where he was found by ACO Scott Prall the morning after he and his littermates were euthanized.

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—and is often one of the few sources of hope for those animals in municipalities overwhelmed by budget challenges and 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 only two dogs left," she says. "Then Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday we got 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 the public (and ourselves) 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 our care not by way of a psychotic abuser or a terrible house fire, but via plain old boring human failings and unfortunate circumstances: a lost job; a messy divorce; an *I'll-get-to-it-later* approach to spay/neuter that 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 still 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. AS