



DYING FOR A HOME

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By Brenda Shoss

The white poodle trembled as cars whizzed past his mangled body at the busy Chicago intersection of Augusta and Central. Cara pulled over, as she'd done countless times, to rescue another animal. She was inches from the dog when a blue car charged over him. The little pup flipped in a morbidly graceful arc before he crashed into the pavement. Cara gently carried his warm body to the curb. There was no tag or chip to personalize the death—only a limp, pink tongue to recall old kisses and canine confidences.

In America, roughly 73 million dogs and 90 million cats live as companions with people (American Pet Products Manufacturers Association [APPM] 2005-2006 National Pet Owners Survey). The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) estimates "thousands upon thousands" of puppies and kittens are born everyday. But unlike the 11,000 human babies who enter the world daily, companion animals are easily cast off.

In our disposable culture, people throw out family pets who soil furniture, chew rugs, or simply grow old. Some obtain kittens or puppies without researching their breed and become frustrated with unanticipated growth spurts or behavioral challenges. Stray and abandoned animals propel the overpopulation dilemma with thousands more offspring. One female dog and her young can produce 67,000 puppies in 6 years. A cat and her litter can create 420,000 kittens in 7 years. A 1998 USA Today report revealed that taxpayers shell out \$2 billion each year to seize, board, kill and discard homeless animals.

What happens to the bewildered family four-legger surrendered to a shelter? Impound No. 52865, a tan-and-white Labrador mix, typifies the fate of many. Days after his humans left him at the North Central Los Angeles Animal Shelter, the confused 4-month-old searched for a familiar face. Each morning, his eye-



brows arched hopefully to greet an Animal Regulations officer. But on day 5 his new friend didn't bring breakfast. The puppy sensed the man's apprehension and his brown eyes widened into terrified pools. This is just a day like any other, he thought as the man cradled him against his chest. A second man armed with a long needle nudged one floppy paw away from the dog's tightly coiled body. Will this hurt? Is this man nice? Impound No. 52865 never found out. Within seconds, death filled his veins in an unrelenting stream.

For Impound No. 49024, a giddy mixed breed border collie, the day ended in a reunion with his guardians. There is a hit-and-miss fate for the 6 to 8 million cats and dogs who annually enter shelters. With only 4 to 6 thousand U.S. facilities, companion animals are routinely destroyed due to lack of space, illness or unadoptability. HSUS estimates 3 to 4 million animals are euthanized every year. Other guesstimates range from 6 to 8 million healthy animals killed annually.



"The nation's shelters have to perform society's dirty work," says Bill Dyer, of the national animal protection group In Defense of Animals. "They do get blamed and that's unfortunate. It's really the fault of people not getting their animals fixed."

An HSUS poster features a puppy in front of a pile of canine carcasses, with the caption: "When you let your pet bring unwanted animals into the world...guess who pays." There are simply more companion animals than loving homes. Each time backyard breeders promise homes for litters, they unintentionally move pound pets to death row. In areas with affordable spay/neuter clinics, educational drives, and low-cost microchip programs—the euthanasia rate has dropped 30 to 60%. Yet an HSUS study indicates that 55% of dogs and 47% of cats enter shelters unaltered.

Extensive sterilization could solve the overpopulation crisis. Unfortunately, misinformation abounds. Fallacy: "The procedure is too painful. I wouldn't consider it until my animal is at least 6 months old." Fact: Most veterinarians now perform spay/neuter at 6 to 10 weeks when general anesthesia and surgery pose minimal risk. Animals resume daily activities within 24 to 72 hours.

Fallacy: "I want an alert, protective animal. If I fix my pet, she'll gain weight. He'll be a sissy." Fact: Sorry guys, but Rover has no sexual ego. He won't grieve the loss of his male identity. He will benefit from a reduced risk for testicular cancer and prostate disease. And female Fluffy will have a significantly diminished chance for mammary, uterine or ovarian cancers. Rover's disposition is the result of genetics and upbringing, not sex hormones. Pudgy pets are the consequence of excess food and minimal exercise. Any new behaviors after sterilization are beneficial. A neutered cat is less inclined to spray and mark territory. Spayed females don't have heat cycles, which prevents crying, anxiety, and unwelcome male suitors.

Alteration procedures also curb aggressive tendencies. Neutered dogs or cats are less prone to bite, fight or stray. On March 6, the mauled body of 10-year-old Rodney McAllister was found in a St. Louis park. An autopsy revealed dog attacks as the cause of death. News articles rightfully focused on the human side of this tragedy. But what about the dogs? Why were tame animals allowed to roam the streets in a ravenous pack? St. Louis stepped up its dog patrols, with 8 catchers on call 7 days a week to fetch the city's 4,000 to 5,000 strays a year. Most of the dogs involved in the McAllister incident were euthanized.

Homeless animals survive defensively, often preying upon wildlife or intimidating children. Dr. Randall Lockwood, vice president for Training Initiatives at HSUS, says "Of the nearly 20 fatalities caused by dog attacks investigated between 1992 and 1994, we have found that none was caused by a spayed or neutered dog." The increased incidence of dog assaults stems from careless overbreeding and lack of sterilization.

Why is one person's trash another person's treasure? Eleven years ago, my cousins found a kitten in the woods behind their home. The first time I met Tikvah, he was an orange vibrating bundle with oversized floppy paws. After a crash course in cat, I embarked on one of the great love affairs of my life.

Eight years ago a Glendale, California park worker also found kittens — buried in a trash dumpster. The 2-hour-old babies, in shock and mewling for their mother, found hope in the D.E.L.T.A. Rescue no-kill shelter. Sadly, 71% of their fellow felines would perish in the nation's kill shelters. With "best friends" euthanized daily, sterilization is not an option. It is every guardian's responsibility.



WHAT YOU CAN DO + RESOURCES

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1.) Spay or neuter all companion animals. Some humane societies, advocacy groups and animal control agencies offer inexpensive or free spay/neuter. If your animals are altered, sponsor a feral cat's or shelter animal's surgery.

Animals guardians may purchase **Spaying and Neutering Certificates** from Friends of Animals to use for routine spay or neuter surgery at any of FoA's participating veterinary hospitals. By mail: Call 1-800-321-PETS (1-800-321-7387) Order online: www.friendsofanimals.org/programs/spay-neuter/

2.) Adopt from a shelter or rescue group. Even those who seek a purebred can choose from approximately 1 out of 4 purebred animals in shelters. Though shelters screen for health or behavioral problems, all animals require your time and tenacity to become devoted friends. Older animals may be house- or obedience-trained, but bear the scars of negligence or abuse. Companion animals can adapt to almost any environment and have a limitless potential for love.

3.) Outfit your companion with a microchip and identification tags. Animals can't call home if lost. Chip + ID Tag...No exceptions!

4.) Be a spay/neuter advocate. Do local shelters require early-age spay/neuter before releasing animals? Do they offer free surgeries for the poor or utilize a mobile outreach van to deliver spay/neuter services to low-income or rural areas? If not, refer shelters, veterinarians and other pet guardians to these resources:

- SPAY-USA, Nationwide network provides affordable spay/neuter programs. Referrals, newsletter, articles, and advocacy. www.spayusa.org
- Low Cost or Free Spay - Neuter Programs in the U.S., listed by state. www.petsandanimals.org/spayneuter_services.html
- Best Friends "No More Homeless Pets" Resource Library, with free materials to download on: No-Kill Ethics, Spay/Neuter, Adoptions, Feral Cats, Resources For Organizations, What One Person Can Do: Resources For Individuals, Humane Education, Animals & Society, Model Programs. www.bestfriends.org/nomorehomelesspets/resourcelibrary/
- Early-Age Sterilization (brochure & video): www.aavar.org/publications.asp
- For materials on trapping/neutering/releasing (TNR) feral cats, contact: Alley Cat Allies (ACA) Suite 201, 1801 Belmont Rd., NW ; Washington, DC 20009-5164 202-667-3630; email: info@alleycat.org; www.alleycat.org

Pet Overpopulation and Ownership Statistics

hsus.org/pets/issues_affecting_our_pets/pet_overpopulation_and_ownership_statistics/

