

## **FOR THE LOVE OF ANIMALS**

**By Connie Toverud, January 2002, The Chapel Hill Herald**

I have led a number of workshops on the East Coast for professional animal workers, primarily shelter personnel and animal control officers. And now, during the holidays, I have my grandchildren with me from Norway. They are 20 months and 5 years old, and both are adopted from China.

Why would I mention these seemingly unrelated events together? Because I am struck with the similar needs of abandoned or abused children and animals, and the compassion and commitment of those who care for them.

Mercifully neither of my granddaughters was abused, but both were picked up on the street and brought to orphanages in China. Although cared for by people who loved children, an orphanage for children is not a "home." They were, however, fed and given basic medical care in the hope that sometime, someone somewhere would take them to a real home and love them forever. Thank God it happened for my granddaughters, but there are many for whom it never happens.

Listening to the stories of the people who work in our animal shelters, or patrol the counties gathering lost, abandoned, abused animals, I am struck not only by how much they love animals, but also by the daily mixture of pain and joy they feel in doing their work.

The shelters are the "orphanages" for animals. Sometimes animals are brought in by conscientious people no longer able to care for them in the hope that the pets might find another home. Sometimes the animals are confiscated by animal control officers who find them chained outside in the cold with neither food nor water. Sometimes they are injured wildlife, brought in for medical care in the hope they may be returned to the wild.

They come in as litters of tiny kittens left by the roadside, or as dogs nearing the end of life. They come in as animals formerly cherished as pets, or as feral cats foraging for scraps in the struggle for life.

What is common to all of these animals at the shelter, and all the children in orphanages, is the fact that they have been placed in the care of professional caregivers who love them, and who pray they might have a future. And the difference? The professional animal workers have to kill many of those they love the most, every day.

We use many different words in describing the killing of these animals. They are "euthanized," "put down", "put to sleep." And there are many times when ending the life of an animal is the only action to be taken. At most shelters, this is done with skill, compassion, and respect for the animal.

I have learned that one of the hardest parts of the job of a shelter worker is knowing that things could be different, that far fewer animals would be euthanized each day if only:

- ... people would spay and neuter their pets.
- ... folks would take as much responsibility for the care of their pets as they do for the care of their cars.
- ... the public understood that kittens and puppies are not able to fend for themselves if left at the side of the road.
- ... owners obeyed the leash laws so their animals were not injured in the road, attacked by other animals, or lost.

Shelter workers wonder why few schools teach children the rules of caring for wild and domestic animals as carefully as they teach the rules of grammar and basketball. They wonder why county governments spend so little money on the care of animals - and sometimes also on the care of children. An animal control officer investigating a report of rampant animal abuse in a home may be greeted at the door with a rifle, and then finds that the children are also being abused, he/she wonders why no one reported the abuse earlier.

When I ask these professional animal workers what is the most rewarding part of the job, they answer almost with one voice, "Having an animal adopted into a great home!!" Adoption counselors work hard to make sure that both the animal and the people are a good match, and that they give support with any post-adoption problems. They make certain that the adopted animals will be spayed or neutered, and identified with a microchip in case they are lost.

Watching people leave the shelter toting dogs, cats, rabbits or other animals, knowing that the animals will give their owners unconditional love, gives shelter workers the same satisfaction the caregivers at the orphanages in China must have felt when my granddaughters were claimed by their new parents.

But there is a difference. Pets are sometimes returned. I talked with an animal adoption counselor who is adopted herself. She says it is difficult to be civil when someone brings an animal back after a few weeks claiming that "it is too much trouble." "I imagine what it would have been like for me if my parents had taken me back to the orphanage because I was "too much trouble," she said.

As we start the new year, I hope we will have an increased awareness of the dedication of our professional animal workers and the needs of the animals they serve. We need the animals God put on this earth as much as they need us. This year the Animal Protection Society of Orange County is raising money for a new adoption center so that adoptable animals might be given 30 days instead of the present 5 to find new homes where they could give and receive love.

And there are many children both here and in other countries who are also longing for people to love them. The joy our Chinese granddaughters bring us is beyond measure. Children and animals. So much love to give and receive.

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