

## **IN SOCIETY'S EYES**

**By Julia L. Hammid, B.A. (April 15, 2003)**

Working with animals can be one of the most personally satisfying and rewarding ways of spending time, whether as a paid staff member or a volunteer. It's no secret that along with the joy comes hard work. But what is often unrecognized are the stresses imposed by the attitudes of the world outside the animal care community. This can take a significant, and often invisible, toll on your energy and overall mental/emotional health. Those who work in animal care are, by and large, a dedicated, loving and mutually supportive community of people. Working within such a community is another one of the benefits of being in this field. But how the public outside this close-knit network views you has a different kind of impact. The public's obliviousness to the work of animal care and rescue is pervasive. It may even come to seem 'normal.' Happily, there are signs that awareness of the importance of the animals in our lives and their needs is growing slowly. As this changes you may even become newly aware that being ignored has been affecting you deeply. Sometimes it's hard to realize how bad things have been until they get better! Many animal shelters have occasional public events, fund-raisers or adoption campaigns, etc. If you've participated in one of these, you know what a boost it can be to have that recognition by the larger community!

Recently my local newspapers have run a couple of wonderful animal-related stories. One was by a reporter who had to have a beloved dog euthanized for medical reasons. She decided to write about the experience as a way of paying tribute to him and to the outstanding care he had received at the hands of the vet who had performed the service. It also served to affirm the validity of her grief over this loss and an affirmation to readers dealing with their own loss of a cherished companion. The other article profiled two women who work at the local animal control facility, including the fact that euthanizing is a necessary and often misunderstood part of their job. The article served to both honor the love and compassion with which they perform this very difficult duty and explain the reasons it is necessary. What a thrill to have the work of animal care professionals written up as legitimate news! I'm sure you have had similar experiences, but they are too few and far between. To some degree the status of animal care workers is part of the general undervaluing of the caregiving professions in our society: nursing, teaching, etc. But these others usually get at least lip-service, if not the funding, to their value to society. The animal care profession still gets very little of either. And this is a very real stress on you.

Picture where your local animal shelter is situated? Is it in the center of town, or on a well-traveled thoroughfare or near an attractive park? Most probably not. More likely it's down at the end of a dead-end street behind factories or warehouses or tucked away among vacant buildings at the edge of town. With few exceptions the shelters I have visited are hidden away next to unsightly and usually little-visited corners of the community. What does this say about society's attitude towards what goes on inside? Is it something the society is proud of and which people like to be reminded of? Or are our homeless and abused animals something most people would rather not think about? Once

you find them, most shelters are well-kept and welcoming places which reflects the care and value the people who spend their time there have for the animals and for the work they do. But no matter how wonderful your organization's network of staff and volunteers is, when you leave you must face a public with a mostly dismissive, and often even hostile, attitude towards your work.

Even well-meaning people who do appreciate what you do can unintentionally contribute to the stress working with animals entails. What do people say when you tell them what you do? Do they seem to really understand or do they say things like, "Oh, it must be great to get to just play with animals all day!" not realizing how hard the work is and how much pain and distress you have to witness each day. How many times have you heard this one? "I could never do what you do... I just love animals too much!" It's hard to know how to respond. It's impossible to fully convey what you see and deal with every day. And no matter how much you try to brush it off or tell yourself it's no big deal, the words and attitude have an effect. It hurts to have what you have devoted your life to is at best misunderstood and at worst belittled, distorted and even scorned.

Maybe the most difficult aspect of the animal care field is euthanasia. No matter how you position yourself in the range of philosophies and practices surrounding this topic, and no matter how much we all wish that it were not this way, the fact is that there are not currently enough homes, nor enough money or personnel and too many injured or neglected animals, not to have to put many, many of them to death. The public's need to deny this fact creates shame and compounds the tremendous pain around having to perform euthanasia. And hidden along with the sadness and pain is the sacredness with which you treat this responsibility, the care you take to make each animal's last moments full of love and respect. The taboo against talking openly about it and/or the justifiable expectation of a negative reaction, can cause anyone associated with animal care to treat this subject with tremendous delicacy.

When we at Support Services for Animal Care Professionals prepare for a workshop, we like to tour the facility we are visiting ahead of time. It helps to get a sense of how that particular organization functions, what kinds of special needs or concerns the personnel might have and just get to know the community a bit before offering our services. It is always great to see how proud the staff are of their operation and we learn so much from the creative ways different shelters have found to deal with the multitude of challenges this work presents. But in many cases, we have to specifically ask to see the euthanasia room. It is often assumed that this is just too upsetting or unpleasant to ask outsiders to confront. In many shelters, only the staff who are directly performing these duties have anything to do with this difficult aspect of the animal care profession as it exists today. In one instance, a shelter who wanted to provide a Compassion Fatigue and Burnout Workshop to their staff went to their town board to obtain funding. When the board saw that the SSACP brochure included reference to euthanasia, the shelter had to find another funding source because they knew the town would never fund something that talked openly about euthanasia.

Those who truly love animals and who have devoted their lives to protecting and caring for them, share the stress and pain that invisibility and devaluation in society's eyes brings. It would be wonderful if we could find some magic to make all humans just wake up and see how much suffering their ignorance, carelessness and irresponsibility inflicts on the animals. But there is no magic... at least not the overnight, quick-fix kind we might dream about. But maybe doing what you do is just as amazing! To continue to do what you do and to do it well, you have developed wonderful strengths and skills in coping with the hard parts of your work. You face the reality every day of a public which is at best ignorant but too often intentionally negligent and sometimes unbelievably cruel. Society's current policies still allow the public to ignore the suffering of the animals and the value of those who tend to them. There is progress in getting intentional harm to animals properly prosecuted but there is a long way to go. And what is equally important, and what you do so diligently, is educate the people who cross your path. And isn't it a kind of magic when someone 'gets it' after you explain the proper way to care for or train an animal or the reasons that euthanasia is necessary?

The isolation which comes with working in animal care is insidious and often invisible. It can become so much a part of your life that you take it for granted. You may become hesitant to share about your work or become resentful and cut off from friends and family. One of the best antidotes can be to find people who are willing to listen to how you are really feeling. Another is to make time to do positive things with animals and to spend time with others who care well for their animals. Offer yourself, and your co-workers, the same compassion you offer the animals when you see them suffering from neglect and abuse at the hands of an unseeing public. Give yourself credit for the tremendous courage and dedication you demonstrate by doing the work you do. Amazing inroads are being made. The shelter in my town is in a central location on the grounds of an historic estate which has been dedicated to animal sheltering since 1926! Another shelter I know of has a downtown storefront office where animals can be easily visited and played with during the day. Those who close their eyes to what you see and do are missing out on what you know so intimately: the love and joy the animals bring to our lives. What you do, day in and day out, *is* making a difference... You *are* making a difference, one animal and one human at a time!

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