WONDERFUL THINGS SHELTERS ARE DOING
By Nancy Mullins, M.A. (July 30, 2003)

We have been privileged to visit animal shelters all over the country as we have presented workshops to help ease Compassion Fatigue and Burnout. This article is dedicated to acknowledging you for some of the talent, creativity, and commitment we have been privileged to witness.

When we walk in the door, we see posters and photographs lining the walls, and thank you letters from new owners expressing gratitude for their adopted pets. Then we see immaculate cat cabanas, dog kennels with toys and soft beds, and special biographical sketches and personality profiles for each animal. We see healthy animals being socialized and exercised and injured/sick animals receiving excellent tech and vet care. At Brazos Animal Shelter, vet students from Texas A & M collaborate with the shelter to offer care for the animals and vet training.

We learn the imaginative ways you encourage adoption with behavioral evaluations and get-acquainted areas where prospective adopters can bring their animals and other family members. We see mobile adoption vans and mini adoption centers in malls and airports. The Quincy Humane Society in Illinois has a wonderfully inviting store front displaying animals for adoption. You have Pets for People programs so qualifying senior citizens can adopt pets for free. You have created posters like "The Top 10 Reasons You Should Adopt An Older Cat Are...," Pet Adoption Campaigns like "Home for the Holidays...and Always," and highway billboards like "Need a friend" with the silhouette of a dog. We've seen animals featured on TV including Jacksonville Humane Society's "Come In For A Test Hug" Campaign. This delightfully creative advertising is modeled after new car ads. Dogs and cats are featured with slogans like, "At last our new models are here, featuring remarkable good looks, unrivaled dependability, guaranteed satisfaction, a guaranteed love affair, every model uniquely suited to its new owner, incredible responsiveness, made to love..." (A free sample can be ordered from Les Loggins, Empire Communications Group, 904-739-0000, lloggins@empirecg.com, and it can be tailored for any shelter.)

In wonderfully innovative ways, you make explicit the realities of pet ownership. Animal Rescue League of Iowa's pamphlet, "Before We Fall in Love...," includes sections on "My love comes with an unconditional guarantee," I don't ever want to leave you," "I believe in birth control," "I'm willing to learn," and "My real personality comes out when I'm behind closed doors." You have pamphlets about "How much trouble could that cute little puppy or kitty be" (about the time, attention, training, patience, and love each needs). You teach "How much does a dog or cat really cost?" "Animals do not make good gifts," and "Children do not make good parents, " followed by "Now that you know what it takes, will you still be our human?" You pass out qualified pet sitter lists.

You create Pets for Life Behavior Training Programs and Helplines to assist adoptive families and to encourage and support people at risk for surrendering their

animals because of behavior difficulties. Your reception areas are full of free ASPCA, HSUS, and AHA handouts on humane dog and cat training. The Denver Dumb Friends League, in partnership with HSUS, has launched the Pets for Life National Training Center.

You do everything you can to help animals become adoptable and you have mobilized and supported thousands of volunteers to help you. You have developed rehabilitation programs for timid dogs and foster care programs for recuperating infant and injured animals. You have volunteer pals for dogs that need special attention and training. You have volunteers greeting the public at the front counter, helping with animal care and grooming, comforting cats, transporting animals, and arranging special events.

You emphasize humane education and you reach out to the community in profound and moving ways. The ASPCA has created Humane Education Materials and Animal Lessons for teachers such as, "Why Dogs Bite" and "Dog Bite Prevention Guidelines for Children." You speak at schools, civic groups, and Petsmart. You use animals to help children learn by practicing their reading to cats and dogs. You have developed after-school clubs, youth community service programs, and Summer Camps so young people can learn respect for all creatures and responsible pet ownership. You are teaching kindness and compassion, rather than violence, as appropriate responses to life situations to children who are the victims of family and/or neighborhood violence.

The Oregon Humane Society has created an Annual Statewide Poster/Photo/Story Contest for Youth with themes for each grade so children can learn while creating a poster or writing a story. You have created Pet-Assisted Therapy programs staffed by volunteers that take animals into hospitals, nursing homes, retirement centers, mental health facilities, schools, and child care centers. You have developed prison projects. You provide Pooch Parks and Pet Cemeteries, Crematoriums and Mausoleums that are available for the public. You have staff and volunteers trained to provide food, water, shelter, rescue, and medical help in the event of disasters. You provide emergency and indigent animal care for pets of victims of domestic violence and homelessness. You use computer programs, tattoos, microchips, and keep cross-files to help track missing pets and reunite them with their owners.

You enlighten the public about its responsibility to "SPAY AND NEUTER EVERYTHING!" You have "Stop Pet Over Population" pamphlets everywhere that teach, "In just 6 years, 1 female dog and her offspring can be the source of 67,000 puppies. In 7 years, 1 cat and her young can produce 420,000 kittens. You provide "Myths and Facts about Spaying and Neutering" (ASPCA). Many shelters have huge banners that say, "14,000 animals received, 3,500 animals adopted. You do the math." Animal Shelter Fact Sheets are one of the first things the public sees in shelters. You are honest with the public by telling them (often in writing) that the animal they are bringing to the shelter is one of nearly 68,000 turned into your shelter each year (186 per day). Fewer than 15% of these animals will be adopted. This is the national average. They should exhaust all other avenues for finding a good home for their pet before bringing

their animal to the Humane Society. You have created Spay/Neuter Assistance Programs that provide qualified applicants with financial assistance toward sterilizing their pets. You have "Spay Waggin" mobile clinics.

Staff at the Humane League of Lancaster County (PA) create spay-neuter posters during staff meetings with colorful drawings and slogans, like
"Cats can't add but they sure can multiply"
"Pet overpopulation isn't the end of the world unless you're a puppy or kitten"
"Any dog will tell you: neuter the darn cat"
"Any cat will tell you: neuter your dog"
"Beat the heat...spay me right away"
"Prevent a litter. Fix your critter"
"Friends don't let friends have litters!!"
"Be an organ donor. Neuter your pet!!"
(The Humane League of Lancaster County may decide to market notecards of these posters so please contact them first if you want to copy them.)

You provide Animal Welfare, Animal Rescue, and Cruelty Investigation. Field staff at The Animal Rescue League of Boston have been trained in rope-based tree climbing so they are now the Boston area experts in tree rescues. Calcasieu Parish Animal Control in Louisiana uses video cameras and audiotapes at the front desk and documents cruelty investigations with video cameras and tapes on the trucks. You have pamphlets about "Help Prevent Animal Cruelty...Be aware, report it...for the animal's sake and because of the links between animal and human violence." You educate about the correlation between children who hurt animals and gross parental neglect, brutality, rejection, and hostility.

As you make the difficult heart-wrenching decisions about euthanasia, you are committed to giving animals a humane death with love, respect, and great technical skill.

You write and lobby to get laws passed to protect animals and make inhumane treatment and cruelty a crime.

You do non-stop fundraising for the animals in your care.

And you have administrators who care about compassion fatigue and who want to support, train and KEEP good staff. In 1996, Tom Colvin, Executive Director of Animal Rescue League of Iowa began DAILY 15-minute briefings to allow supervisors to present critical pieces of information and to give each employee a chance to speak about important issues. He says this has become his most indispensable management and communication tool. (To learn more, contact Tom at TLColvin@quest.net)

We, the staff of SSACP (both as professionals and as representatives of the public), want to express our respect for you and for the work you do. You are amazing. You ARE making a difference. We wish the public had the same opportunity to know you that we do. Thank you for your wisdom and diplomacy in dealing with the public. For all the

times you have responded to rudeness, swearing, criticism, unfairness, and cruelty to animals with a desire to help and educate, we want to acknowledge you. You constantly seek to learn not only what the public should know, but what they are ready to hear, and the best way to teach it.

Thank you for your endless creativity and caring, and for your love and commitment to the animals.

Nancy Mullins, M.A., is a licensed marriage and family therapist. She has presented workshops for 20 years on grief, loss, trauma, and childhood abuse, nationally and internationally, including in Oklahoma City, Northern Ireland, and Zimbabwe (12 years as a member of the staff of Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross). She is trained in Critical Incident Debriefing. She is a partner in Support Services for Animal Care Professionals (SSACP) where she has staffed Workshops for animal welfare workers and veterinary practices.

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