As photo editor at The Humane Society of the United States, Michelle Riley is inundated with emails from photographers. Some come from professionals who’ve been working for decades and have shot assignments all around the world. Others are just getting started in their careers and are looking to get their lens in the door. Still others are from people who just got their first camera and want to start picking up professional freelance assignments right away, or from someone whose 10-year-old kid is the next Ansel Adams and recently took a photo of a bunny from 20 yards away that would be so perfect for the cover of the next magazine. You get the picture.

But last autumn, an email landed in Riley’s inbox that really caught her eye, and as she would soon find out, it caught a lot of other people’s eyes, too. Dallas portrait photographer Teresa Berg was experiencing a surge of media attention because of her volunteer photography work and what it was doing for the local animal rescue community. It started off a few years ago with a simple offer to help the rescue where she’d gotten her own dog, but it quickly took on a life of its own once it became clear that Berg’s photos were actually helping dogs get adopted faster.

In the last year alone, Berg has been featured on a CBS Sunday Morning segment, she’s been live on a BBC 5 news radio program in London, she’s been featured in an article in the Toronto Star, she’s been a guest blogger on Dogster, and the list goes on. And because of a local TV news story, an anonymous benefactor has offered to set up a professional photo studio inside the Dallas Animal Services facility at his expense, so that Berg and other photographers (both pros and shelter volunteers) can use their skills to help more animals.

In this edited interview, Berg talks with Riley about how it all got started.

Animal Sheltering: Can you tell me a little about yourself? How did you get into photography?

Teresa Berg: I actually went to photography school ages ago right out of high school. …I didn’t want to study anything else. My dad was a very serious amateur photographer, and he used to photograph us at home every week. He worked for the Associated Press, so he had access to a darkroom when I was a kid, and we used to take pictures together and then he’d take them to work and develop them. So I got introduced to it very young, and it’s all I really wanted to do. … Over the years I did other things, but always kept coming back to photography. And then in 2003, one of my nephews said, “Aunt Teresa, I’m getting married, I can’t afford a photographer, would you be willing to take our pictures?” So that’s when I started getting interested in portraits again.

So how did you get into the pet side?

I started with people and then, because I had a studio in my home and everybody knew I was a pet lover, people started saying, “We’d...
really like a family portrait, but it wouldn’t be the same if Fluffy couldn’t be in the picture.” And then a year or two goes by, and I’m looking to adopt a dog myself. I knew I wanted a longhaired dachshund, and so I started looking through the dachshund listings. I found a dog that I wanted to adopt, and I called the Dallas-Fort Worth Dachshund Rescue Foundation. They brought the dog out to me and did a home visit, and I ended up adopting the dog. And I said to them, “You know, you guys are so good at what you do, and the dogs are healthy and you run such a good organization, but you could really use some better pictures.” And they were nice enough not to be offended, and I said, “I would love to volunteer to do that for you.”

So they took you up on that?
They did. We started a pilot program, so every time they had a new dog enter the program, their director would call me and say, “We’re picking up a new dog. Can we bring him by for pictures?” So I’d photograph that dog, and we’d put the pictures on Petfinder. There’s a little report that you can get from Petfinder that tells you how many hits each animal gets, and so they started watching the statistics, and we noticed [on] the ones with the new photographs, the hits were up like tenfold. So then we started putting my photos on their blog, and the stats on the blog went sky high, and we just experienced this little explosion of interest in the dogs. So we said, “Hey, we’re on to something here.” So we started doing an annual calendar. They would pick 12 dogs from the previous year that had all been adopted out through their program, and they would be our calendar dogs. And we started selling the calendars, and it actually showed people what really nice dogs you can get through animal rescue. So that started working really well, and the dogs were getting adopted so much faster. … It actually would free up another foster home, because the dogs, instead of being there three to six months, were there eight to 10 weeks.

Wow, that’s a huge difference.
Yeah, it’s a big, big difference. After we’d been doing this for about a year we realized we were placing twice as many dogs. The adoption rate went up 100 percent, so we thought, “OK, we gotta keep doing this because we’re able to get twice as many dogs off the street.” So that’s when I realized that this group was a really great test case; we had some statistics that we could show people. Then I decided, well, maybe I could do this on a little bit larger scale. So I started working with the Collin County Humane Society, and they place 650 dogs a year. They’re a much bigger group. And so I started, just this last year, photographing their dogs, and we’re seeing a lot of the same successes. They’re getting adopted a lot faster.

Do you always have them come to your studio, or do you do any on location?
I pretty much do everything at the studio right now. It enables me to do more if they bring the dogs to me. Dallas is so spread out, I could spend two hours on the road just going out to one foster home and coming back, where in that same two hours I can photograph 10 dogs. But when we photographed them for the calendar, we either photograph them in the studio or outdoors, but not with their families. We’re just showcasing the dogs here; we don’t want to distract from the dogs. We want people to see the incredible beauty and variety of the dogs they can get through rescue. … We want that person to connect with that animal. We want them to feel like they’re making eye contact. We want them to feel like they’re being able to see a little bit of that animal’s personality. We want them to fall in love, but we also want them to see as much of the body shape and what that dog’s really like. So we try to keep it clean and simple to try and let their personalities shine through.

I’ve had emails from people that say, “I’ve been trying to go to my local animal shelter and tell them how to take better pictures for years and they wouldn’t believe me. They said, ‘Oh, the pictures are good enough, the pictures don’t make that much of a difference.’ And then your story came out, and now they want to talk to me.” And something like that, I mean, that just makes my week.

When did the classes get started?
Well, when we started seeing our success rates soar, we wanted to be able to get other people doing this, because obviously I can’t photograph all the adoptable dogs in Dallas County. So I started inviting people to the studio for a monthly class, and I said, “I’ll show you how I do what I do and help you translate that into
whatever organization you’re working for.” And the class was free, the only thing [was that] they had to be a volunteer with a rescue group or a shelter organization. Then the CBS Sunday Morning story came out, and I was just deluged. And so we decided to start doing it online. We have to charge a small fee, but I encourage people to attend with a friend or to get several people from their group together to watch it. I have done a couple of these classes on site for animal shelters. The city of Plano is close to me, and I went and did an on-site course for them, and I scoped out good areas on their premises and in their facility and helped their volunteers with their equipment.

Are the webinar attendees local, or are you getting them nationally?
We’re getting them internationally. I’ve gotten emails from graduate students in New Zealand that are wanting to do this for a project. We’ve had several people in the U.K., tons of people in Canada, especially since the Toronto Star did that big piece. So it’s been really widespread. I was really shocked and surprised. We’re averaging about 40 people per webinar. Think about that: If each one of those people adopts a rescue group, that’s not just 150 dogs, that’s 150 rescue groups that now have somebody who is hopefully taking much better pictures.

What are the challenges that you’ve found so far?
Some of the dogs that I’ve photographed, they may be in foster care, but they were on the streets two days prior so they’re not always socialized. A lot of times they’re very fearful, and one of the most important things that I try and teach people is [not to] photograph that dog with his ears back and his tail tucked between his legs; don’t photograph him cowering in the corner, because nobody is going to resonate with that pet, nobody is going to want to adopt that dog because he looks like a pitiful mess. Find a way to get him to perk his ears up. We talk about making funny little noises. I’m a big advocate of string cheese because that seems to be a treat that no dog can resist. And sometimes if you can distract them with food, they’ll relax a little bit. Basically I try to get the dogs to look happy and friendly and make eye contact with the camera. Some dogs, they don’t make eye contact with humans, let alone a big black camera. We try and keep the environment as quiet as possible, and then we just distract them with a funny noise. I have quite a repertoire of funny noises I can make. It’s easier to make a funny noise with my throat than to have a variety of squeaky toys, because any dog, they hear a noise once or twice and then they tune it out. So you can’t keep squeaking the same noise at them because then it irritates them, or they just want to back away. So you use different noises. If you’re in a quiet room, a noise, even if it’s just dropping the car keys, they’re going to perk up their ears like, “Oh, what was that?” And then it’s just a timing issue. You have to be ready so when you make that crazy noise … you can snap that picture.

Is there is any dog in particular or anything that you’re especially proud of?
Well, I have to tell you about this project that I’m working on, because it’s my heart’s desire come true, and I’m just so thrilled. I was approached by a couple members of the Dallas Symphony Orchestra; they are dog lovers and they saw the CBS Sunday Morning thing and they want to do a concert set to my photography. This is like a photographer’s dream, right? So … we’re going to tell little photographic stories, little vignettes, little essays about the dogs set to their music. And one of the first contacts I had with them was the principal oboist, and she rescues dogs; she ran the New York City marathon
and raised $10,000 and gave it all to animal rescue. And right now she is fostering a pit bull that every time she plays her oboe, he sings. So I told her we need to hold onto this dog, because during intermission we're going to put him up in a little tuxedo collar and have him come out on stage. And she is going to play “How Much is That Doggie in the Window?” and he's going to howl. So, yeah, that's my very exciting project. We've got the venue secured and it's all going to go to animal rescue. To me if there's any dog that needs help marketing, it's either the pit bulls or maybe the senior dogs. So we're trying to pick a group or organization that would benefit most for either pit bulls or maybe senior dogs.

I have to ask, do you do anything that you get paid for? Well, I get my expenses covered by the webinars. I have to hire some help for some of that, but I do make a little bit of money; I also donate a portion of the proceeds to animal rescue, though. I make my living photographing people, so maybe 70 percent of what my studio does is people photography. Basically, the babies are paying for the dogs. AS