FRIENDS... WITH BENEFITS

SHELTERS AND ‘FRIENDS OF’ GROUPS TEAM UP FOR SUCCESS

BY JAMES HETTINGER
“Friends of the shelter” groups are common around the country, often founded by animal-loving citizens to raise money for municipal shelters, which have limited budgets and are typically prohibited from fundraising on their own. With the growing public expectation that even resource-strapped animal care and control agencies will save more animals’ lives, “friends of” groups can be a godsend, helping shelters raise cash to treat special medical cases, providing foster care and volunteer labor, or taking shelter animals to off-site adoption events.

“When you’re … doing animal control, you’re having to answer the phone, you’re doing owner surrenders, you’re doing adoptions—it becomes really hard to think about things like how to advertise the animals, or taking them off site to events,” says Heather Bialy, director of shelter services for The HSUS. “And that’s where these ‘friends of’ groups can really help, because they can organize those events, and fundraise, and take some of the burden off of the municipal shelter.”

When the shelter and its “friends of” group are working well together, everybody’s happy. Citizens get the satisfaction of helping a cause that’s dear to their hearts, while shelters get more publicity, increase their lifesaving capacity, or perhaps just find a way to acquire a new washing machine that wasn’t otherwise in the budget.

These partnerships are typically most successful when each group’s role is clearly defined, says Inga Fricke, director of sheltering and pet care issues for The HSUS. “Friends of” groups—many of which are independent entities with their own 501(c)(3) tax-exempt designations from the Internal Revenue Service—tend to handle fundraising and promotions, while shelters focus on policymaking and day-to-day operations. “When those organizations complement each other, they can do wonderful things. When they start to overstep their roles and responsibilities, that’s when the relationships get strained,” she says. In some communities, difficulties have been created when tension between a shelter and its “friends of” group results in public arguments and grievances aired in the local media, causing confusion and damaging public perceptions of the shelter.

But those cases are rare. If you want to create the beginnings of a beautiful friendship, there are ways to avoid the pitfalls. In this feature, we offer a few snapshots of “friendships” that are thriving.

You can’t choose your family, the old saying goes, but you do get to choose your friends. In animal welfare work, as in life, it’s good to choose carefully.

THE MODEL: Friends fundraising for municipal shelter needs

SNAP- ping to it in Arizona

In Maricopa County, Ariz., a “friends of” group has helped animal care and control make a dent in one of the nation’s most severe pet overpopulation problems.

The county ranks second only to Los Angeles County in the United States in the number of homeless animals taken into shelters, says Tina Lopez-Eacret, executive director of Friends of Animal Care & Control, a nonprofit organization founded a decade ago. She attributes the high numbers partly to the transient nature of Phoenix—many people surrender their pets because they’re moving.

The “friends of” group was started by local animal lovers who saw a need for a fundraising arm for the county shelter, which as a government entity couldn’t solicit money and wasn’t eligible for some grant funding available to 501(c)(3) organizations, Lopez-Eacret says. Today, the group raises about $25,000 a month through a thrift store and a variety of fundraisers, the largest of which is the annual Hero Awards banquet honoring dogs and cats with extraordinary stories. The money supports the county’s Spay/Neuter Assistance Program (SNAP), which provides free spay/neuter vouchers to people for their owned animals.

“With their help, our Spay/Neuter Assistance Program has been phenomenally successful,” says Aprille Hollis, spokeswoman for county animal care and control. The program, which works with a network of veterinarians and public clinics, provided about 11,000 surgeries free to pet owners last year. “We couldn’t do that without their fundraising.” People apply to the county, receive a voucher in the mail, then have 90 days to choose from a list of participating veterinarians; the vet clinics send the redeemed vouchers to the county for reimbursement.

The county has seen its intake of animals decrease in recent years, and Hollis thinks SNAP is partly responsible. Hollis and Lopez-Eacret agree that open communication is a key to a strong relationship between a shelter and its “friends of” group. Lopez-Eacret meets regularly with the head of the county facility, and talks frequently to Hollis, especially when the group has an upcoming event. If the group needs volunteers, Lopez-Eacret will talk to the coun-
Giving a Hootie in South Carolina

In Columbia, S.C., the amount of help the city’s animal services department gets from outside groups has gotten pretty big.

But here’s some advice from Marli Drum, superintendent of Columbia Animal Services: “Be willing to start small.”

The city shelter, which takes in about 12,000 animals a year, works with several nonprofits to fill different niches, Drum explains. One of its partners is the Animal Mission, an all-volunteer nonprofit that raises money to provide spay/neuter vouchers for the city to distribute, buys all the shelter’s pet food, and has helped remodel the shelter.

The Animal Mission has a secret weapon in its corner: Jim Sonefeld, the group’s president, plays drums. Professionally. For a little band called Hootie and the Blowfish.

A longtime animal lover who wanted to give back to his community, Sonefeld got invited by Drum to join the Animal Mission board in the mid-1990s. Over the years, Sonefeld says, he has been both a day-to-day board member and a celebrity fundraiser for the group. He’s gotten Hootie and the Blowfish to play a benefit show/auction known as Party Animals about five times. The venues got bigger, and the Animal Mission was able to raise ticket prices to increase revenue.

In its early years, Animal Mission might have raised $12,000 a year. Now it’s been known to raise $100,000 or more, but Drum notes, “Nothing happens overnight.” She advises shelters exploring the world of “friends of” groups to start by thinking of something they need that would make day-to-day life easier.

“It doesn’t have to be, ‘We’re going to save 100 more animals this month.’ It could be, ‘We just need this little bit of equipment. That would make life so much easier for our kennel staff.’ Boom—work on that,” Drum says. “Find things that you can obtain and feel like you’re winning, and then start looking a little bigger and grow your program.”

The Animal Mission board is well-connected and diverse, and its members use their influence to keep event costs down. One member in the advertising business helped secure free or inexpensive services; another worked in the mayor’s office and got police officers to work security for no charge. Sonefeld talked his band into playing concerts for free. The poor economy has hampered fundraising, Sonefeld notes, but it’s also created opportunities: When business is bad, businesses might have inventory to donate to a fundraising auction.

Sonefeld says people working on animal welfare issues in the area have come to realize that, “It’s not just about building a bigger shelter or getting better food.” The goal is to lower the euthanasia rate, which means promoting spay/neuter. His celebrity status has helped make the Animal Mission’s fundraisers successful, but changing people’s attitudes about spay/neuter is a steeper challenge.

“It helps in fundraising terms to be able to have someone who’s a local celebrity knocking on your door to say, ‘Sponsor this event. Give us $5,000 to come see Hootie and the Blowfish, my band, in a nice, intimate setting with an auction,’” Sonefeld says. “But ultimately we still fight the bigger problem of Jim Sonefeld, the celebrity from a big rock ‘n’ roll band, can’t convince Joe in the county to spay and neuter his Lab.”

In an era when government funds are tight, Drum says she’s grateful for the outside help, and for a community that’s willing to donate. “I don’t think any one of us can solve the problem of pet overpopulation on our own,” she says. “… We have to say, ‘All right, we can cover this if you can cover that.’”
**THE MODEL: Friends supplementing the fundraising of a nonprofit**

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**Bonding in Birmingham**

Jacqueline Meyer, executive director of the Greater Birmingham Humane Society (GBHS) in Alabama, says she can hardly overstate the importance of the auxiliary that assists her organization.

“We don’t exist, in my mind, if the auxiliary doesn’t. They are the right and left hand of this organization,” says Meyer. “They’re the sweet, nice-looking, fun end of what we do, but they also get down and dirty, and they represent an arm of this community that we otherwise probably wouldn’t have as our donor base.”

The GBHS is a private, nonprofit facility that takes in about 10,000 animals a year and receives no government funding, Meyer explains. Since 2009, the auxiliary’s donations to GBHS have totaled nearly $1 million. The group, which works in cooperation with the humane society’s development and marketing department, has helped the GBHS move from a small shelter to a beautiful facility with a barn for rescued livestock, she adds.

Auxiliary members raise money through a variety of events including a Mardi Gras ball and a fashion show, and they also roll up their sleeves and volunteer for the shelter, particularly after natural disasters.

“I just would love for all the shelters to have this, because it’s such a bond,” says auxiliary member Donna O’Brien. “… It’s a different way to help the shelter, but you make such good friends.”

Meyer notes that when she’s dealing with the auxiliary members, it’s essential for her to be clear on her vision, to see if they agree with it, and then figure out how to attain it. Many auxiliary volunteers are active in other organizations in the community as well, so Meyer has to make sure they understand, for example, why GBHS might not want to transfer a dog to a local rescue group that doesn’t provide optimal care.

O’Brien, who’s been part of the auxiliary for about 15 years, notes that when Meyer first came on board, the group was smaller and less professional than it needed to be. As new, younger members joined, the group became more business-like and started working more closely with the shelter, O’Brien says. Now, she adds, “A lot of us take this as a job.”

GBHS experienced growing pains as well, Meyer says. Some of the younger humane society employees are rough around the edges, Meyer notes, adding that, as a Yankee from upstate New York, she can come across the same way. For everyone to co-exist, she adds, it’s “no different than a sorority or a fraternity,” where people need to get along and respect each other’s sensitivities. Auxiliary members might have to recognize, for example, that it’s not appropriate to wear fur coats at humane society events.

Meyer sees the auxiliary members as ambassadors for the humane society. “If you bring in an auxiliary of educated, well-placed people that are in the community, it really helps the community see the shelter as something more than a pound.”

She and O’Brien agree that communication is the key to a strong shelter-auxiliary relationship. “The No. 1 important thing is to not hide anything,” Meyer says, noting that her shelter’s statistics and reasons for euthanasia are available.

O’Brien says the open lines of communication help to prevent misunderstandings. “If I don’t have an answer to these questions that people ask me, what’s so wonderful is I...
can just call Jacque. ... Anybody at the shelter, I've got their direct number," O'Brien says. "... It's just no problem."

And Meyer says the relationship works both ways. When the shelter veterinarian needs dental equipment, a surgery table, or an autoclave, for example, she knows to approach the auxiliary—whose members love to purchase things that directly benefit animal care, Meyer notes.

"It's Easy Street for me," Meyer says. "As an executive director ... I know right where I'm going when I have a problem."

THE MODEL: Friends running the shelter

Don’t Forget the Motor City Suburbs

Sometimes it’s not just the animals who need to be saved.

Back in 1993, two residents of suburban Detroit rescued a stray dog running on a golf course. When they saw the conditions at the Dearborn Animal Shelter, they realized the shelter itself needed help, so they founded Friends for the Dearborn Animal Shelter, according to Elaine Greene, the group’s executive director. The shelter in the early ’90s was a cramped facility where animals were often euthanized after a four-day holding period, she says.

The group initially helped spruce up the shelter, provide extra care for the animals, and initiate adoptions—and its efforts caught the eye of the local powers that be. In 1996, at the urging of the police chief, the group contracted with the city to operate and manage the shelter.

Greene says when she came on board in 1996, the group’s staff consisted of herself, another full-time worker, and one part-time staffer. It now has 11 full-time and 11 part-time people, handling about 2,400 dogs and cats annually. Similarly, the facility has expanded to include several trailers for animals, administrative offices, and storage; the long-term goal is to build a new facility.

Perhaps most importantly, Greene notes, the shelter has been able to save 100 percent of its adoptable animals for the past 11 years.

Hiring a development specialist who’s good at her job has been a key to the group’s growth, Greene notes. The group has always focused on community outreach and education, and its track record has helped spur donations from local residents, she adds. "They knew how it used to be ... and know how it is now, and so they appreciate the efforts and the work that we do. We have community leaders that are involved with us, which is a big help."

When the Friends group first got organized, its members worked closely with animal control and city leaders, and learned how to relate to them, Greene notes. "So when we came in here [to run the shelter], we weren’t unknown to them," she says—a good strategy for any group working with shelter management or a local government.

At first there was a lot to learn: "Working with the police department, which basically oversees our operation, there’s a chain of command, and you have to learn how to work within the chain of command," Greene says. "... You can’t just make decisions without considering your partners."

Greene advises fledgling “friends of” groups to develop a business plan that covers at least the next five years and includes a method of funding. The group has to know how it’s going to be able to afford to carry out its plans, she says. "Here we’re in the position now where we’re fundraising 90 percent of our operational costs, and it’s expensive."

She also advises groups to make sure they understand what the government will provide, and what’s expected of the group. Dearborn officials were clear when they first approached the Friends group with a contract, Greene says, "but without that clear understanding—that’s where I think people get into trouble."

If you’re going to actually run a shelter as the Dearborn group does, you’ll need training and, ideally, staffers with some shelter experience to help. “Having people that have never done it before makes it much more difficult,” Greene says, noting that you can avoid missteps by having an experienced person formulating procedures.

It’s also good to let people know that you have the community’s best interests at heart. Shortly after the Dearborn group took over, it invited local veterinarians to dinner, and asked them how they’d like to participate in the shelter’s plan to sterilize animals before they went into homes. "I would say 90 percent of them came on board right away," Greene says. Veterinarians sometimes fear that shelters will undercut their business, but Greene says the Dearborn group emphasized that its goal “is not to replace them, but [to] work with them to make a better community for the residents and the animals.”"AS"