



# The Joy of Adopting

by ARNA COHEN

**I called everyone I knew** the day I got a job at an animal shelter. Already a volunteer, I couldn't believe I was actually going to be paid to indulge my passion for animals. But several people did not share my enthusiasm. "Are you sure, Arna?" they asked. "I could never do that. It's too sad."

It was a response I would hear repeatedly for the next eight years. And yes, we saw our share of sadness—abuse, abandonment, neglect, ignorance—but what kept us going were the unexpected joys: of adopting out three darling beagle puppies found in a dumpster; of rescuing hissing feral kittens from a parking lot in bone-chilling weather and turning them into playful, purring balls of fluff; of finding homes for 17 pet rats rescued from an unspeakable hoarding situation.

The persistent notion of shelters as collections of tragic animals has long kept too many people away. "Before" and "after" images of matted dogs and sick cats, while helpful in showcasing the challenges and success stories of daily shelter work, haven't proven to be a big draw for potential adopters. "The public doesn't want to go into the shelter and see row after row after row of sad, awful-situation animals," says my colleague Inga Fricke, HSUS director of shelter initiatives. "We know as shelter people that that's the exception rather than the rule. We're constantly trying to tell people that we're filled with

wonderful, happy, loving pets."

Like the sweet golden retriever brought to my shelter by his heartbroken family. Moving to England, they couldn't bear to submit their beloved pet to six months in a quarantine kennel, and they left the shelter in tears. The next evening, their kind neighbor came in to adopt the dog, giving the family peace of mind that he was in good hands and would remain part of their lives. There wasn't a dry eye among us that night.

The reasons people give up their animals, though no surprise to shelter veterans, come as a shock to those just

entering the field. Certainly there's the occasional cat with litter box issues or dog who eats the furniture (and even those issues aren't insurmountable). But many more animals end up homeless because of allergies, illness, divorce, job change, a death in the family. In other words—life happens, and pets often bear the brunt of the fallout.

Yet only 25 percent of cats and dogs in U.S. households—and less than 5 percent of other pet species—come from shelters and rescues. These statistics served as the impetus for the Shelter Pet Project, a nationwide campaign to boost shelter adoptions. A collaboration of The HSUS, Maddie's Fund, and the Ad Council, the campaign's ads on TV and elsewhere aim to turn the misperceptions about homeless animals—that they are unhealthy or emotionally scarred—inside out.

Regardless of where they come from, most animals need a little help in perfecting their "people" skills. At my old shelter, we viewed the ones with baggage as challenges, not lost causes, and we regularly made miracles happen. Moonshadow, a black Persian cat confiscated from a disreputable breeder, came to us dirty, matted, and

furious. Who wouldn't be after spending his entire life in a filthy backyard shed with little to no human interaction? We almost needed full body armor just to put food in his cage.

Over the several months it took to get ownership of him in court, slow, patient affection transformed Moonshadow from nearly feral to an outgoing, charming boy who couldn't get enough tummy rubs. The joy I felt on his adoption day has stayed with me through the years, bubbling to the surface when I recently looked through the stories and photos of adopted animals submitted by *All Animals* readers.

I am touched by the writers' fervent belief in shelter adoption and their gratitude to the dedicated people who continue to perform miracles. I was particularly moved by the story of Shannon Wellin, whose experiences rescuing animals as a shelter volunteer in Japan led her to seek a career in animal welfare. Where have I heard that story before?

► *Arna Cohen is an associate editor for The HSUS.*



## The Odd Couple

A woman brought Dolgthrasir, a blue point Tonkinese kitten, to the veterinary clinic where I worked, wanting to get rid of him because he wouldn't stop meowing. Loving kittens, I just had to open the box. I looked at him, he looked at me, and he never really meowed again.

Dolg loved other animals, especially our rat, Turfle, who was a surprise Christmas gift from my 10-year-old daughter's friend. Dolg adopted Turfle as his own and protected her. When we took Turfle out of her cage and put her on the bed to play, Dolg would jump up with her. He would let Turfle sleep on him, and she would clean his face and ears.

They have changed the way our family views extraspecies relationships. My daughter was so touched that she started her own rescue for pocket pets. Now 13, Hannah evaluates potential adopters, conducts home visits, and makes and sells jewelry to support her efforts. She's rescued four pets and found good homes for three.

Both Turfle and Dolgthrasir have passed on now. We miss them terribly.

— DAWN TRYBJORN, SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

## Travel Incentive

We found Penelope (left) through the Almost Home Dachshund Rescue Society. No one knew much about the 3-year-old except that her previous owner didn't have time for her anymore. Their loss was our gain. This precious angel jumped into the car with us and never looked back. She was already housetrained and desperately needed someone to love her. Our 12-year-old dachshund, Maggie, has become her best buddy.

As our way of giving back, we've become involved with transporting rescued dachshunds, helping to drive them from one city or state to another for fostering or adoption. We can't stress enough the need to adopt.

— DEBBI AND JERRY ZIMMERMAN,  
MOUNT PLEASANT, SOUTH CAROLINA



## Diamond in the Rough

At the Kennebec Valley Humane Society, where I volunteer, staff members weren't sure whether Manny was going to be adopted. Found as a kitten hiding under a house, he had severely deformed back legs and was unable to navigate a litter box. I'm a rehabilitation therapist for blind and visually impaired people; I wanted to see what Manny was capable of with a little help and offered to foster him. He never went back.

An extremely affectionate and outgoing guy, he quickly adapted to our retired greyhound and eight cats, one of whom has three legs and another of whom is deaf. I purchased a litter box with a low-cut front made for box-training puppies, and he used it perfectly. After an orthopedic surgeon stabilized one leg, Manny can now hop in and out of a regular litter box, zoom around the house, and even use stairs. I encourage everyone to consider adopting a handicapped pet. Their resilience and ability to adapt will amaze and inspire you.

— NANCY PEAVY, AUGUSTA, MAINE



## When Sally Met Susie

Susie was featured on our weekly newspaper's pet page for nearly three months before I finally called the SPCA Los Angeles to ask why she hadn't yet been adopted. I was given all her attributes—smart, confident, independent—and her single flaw: appearance. Having been overbred all her life, the 7-year-old, 40-pound pit bull mix was afflicted with a droopy undercarriage. (As a 57-year-old out-of-shape woman myself, I immediately identified with Susie!)

Found in a parking lot, Susie had an alert, inquisitive nature—perfect for the shelter's Teaching Love and Compassion program, in which at-risk kids train dogs and learn to care for them. Although I'd always adopted poodles, when I heard Susie's story, I felt it was almost my duty to go see her.

I became the happy guardian of one of the smartest, sweetest dogs I have ever known. One of Susie's special talents is her ability to pick up, carry, and play with squeaky toys in absolute silence. I believe this is a result of her having carried so many puppies so carefully for years.

From the moment I first spoke to a shelter staff member, I was repeatedly met with smart, knowledgeable, and compassionate people at the SPCA facility in Hawthorne, Calif. Susie was well-trained by staff, students, and volunteers to become a good friend and companion. It is a privilege to provide a home for such a deserving dog.

— SALLY TEPHANY,  
RANCHO PALOS VERDES, CALIFORNIA



## Mane Attraction

While this might seem like an ordinary picture, what you don't see is that Mighty Quinn was five hours away from being shipped to his death. Named after the Bob Dylan song, Quinn was part of a group of horses being auctioned off in New Jersey; those not purchased by the weekend would be sold for slaughter. Quinn's picture was posted by a horse rescue group on Facebook, and I couldn't understand why such a beautiful horse wasn't spoken for. I bought him sight unseen, scrambling to arrange a truck, driver, and stall for him.

It was obvious that Quinn was terrified of people when I got him. After months of hard work, he finally is learning to trust people and even runs up to the gate when he sees me. He loves being pampered and follows me around like a puppy dog.

Tens of thousands of horses bought by auction houses are shipped to slaughter facilities in Mexico and Canada every year. Quinn was one of the lucky ones.

— BREE THEODORIDIS, NEW YORK CITY, NEW YORK



## Putting Tragedy Behind Them

When my husband and I were stationed at the Air Force base in Okinawa, Japan, I started volunteering at the Okinawan-American Animal Rescue Society. Ainsley (right), a young Shiba Inu mix, had been hung from a tree and beaten like a piñata, her leg broken in four places. She'd languished in the shelter for months when I took her to our house to foster.

Ainsley is a wonderful dog and eventually returned home to Delaware with us. Despite corrective surgery in Japan, her leg ultimately had to be amputated.

My experience as a shelter volunteer made me realize that I wanted to continue working with animals rather than return to teaching. I became an animal control officer in Kent County, Del., where I met Trigger, a pit bull/shepherd mix. He'd been shot repeatedly, hit by a car, and left for dead. Trigger came home with us as a foster to recover from his amputation. Ainsley and Trigger were the best of friends, each with three legs and the ability to run like the wind.

— SHANNON WELLIN, CAMDEN, DELAWARE



## Are You My, Uh, Mother?

Though I'd fostered a variety of dogs for the Arizona Humane Society, I'd always been a cat person. Then I was handed a baby Chihuahua who'd just been picked up on a Phoenix street. I caught my breath at this tiny miracle, and one of the staff said, "You'll be a foster failure"—the term they use when a foster parent can't resist the temptation to adopt. Well, she was sure right: Little Rocky is an integral part of our family and is especially fond of the kittens I foster.

My cats ignore the kittens, but Rocky plays and wrestles with them, curling up for a nap when they get tired. His attention is as important to their socialization as mine, preparing them for life in a new home with other pets. Fostering truly does save animal lives!

— TERRI DUNLAP, GILBERT, ARIZONA