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MARIN HUMANE SOCIETY

Growing shelter helps pets find home

By Peggy Spear

All eyes in the small examining room were on Jerry, as he prowled around and looked at unfamiliar objects, making quiet noises and finally pouncing on a shiny pink ball.

"He's a good one," said Annie Black, scratching a note on a clipboard. "And he has fancy testicles. Too bad he has to get rid of them."

Jerry is a 1-year-old gray cat, found earlier in the 24-hour Night Kennel at the Marin Humane Society. A note from his former owner movingly told the rescuers that she lived in a small apartment and had to surrender her 10 cats or be evicted.

It's not a new story for the shelter, nor for Black, who has volunteered at the society in various capacities since 1986. While she says she's no "cat whisperer," she does have an uncanny ability to assess the character of finicky felines, and determine the type of home they will need next.

It's that type of attention to detail — the tireless vetting of animals brought into the Novato center — that is a hallmark of the Marin Humane Society, and helped elevate it to one of the most comprehensive and well-respected animal rescue organizations in California. The shelter has been awarded many federal and state proclamations, but perhaps more importantly, other shelters across the U.S. have asked the humane society for advice on caring for animals, Chief Operating Officer John Reese said.

The Marin Humane Society has been around since 1907, when a San Anselmo woman named Ethyl Tompkins wanted to help out cattle and horses with rest and water as they made their journey through the warm Marin countryside. The center was located in San Rafael until the current facility was built in 1968. Resembling more of a school than a cinder-block



Photos by Dan Evans / The Chronicle

Above: Dr. Belinda Ecans checks a rabbit's vital signs while administering anesthesia for a procedure. **Below:** Tabitha, a cat at the Marin Humane Society, watches activity in the hallway.

animal shelter, the 40,000-square-foot campus is spread over seven acres on Bel Marin Keys Boulevard. The adoptions center resembles a bustling mall, with families coming and going to look over the animals available for adoption, volunteers dropping off or picking up foster animals and shoppers browsing the on-site pet supplies store.

The thriving shelter is dedicated to the welfare of not only dogs and cats, but rabbits, turtles, rodents, birds, chickens, lizards, fish and even larger barn



animals on occasion. In fact, in 2012, the society experienced double-digit growth, including a 20 percent increase in adoptions.

But it is other programs like the training services they offer for pet owners, the community outreach efforts that touch young and old alike and the care of the every animal that distinguish the shelter. In a 2012 Marin County survey, 92 percent of donors said the shelter has a "major impact on the lives of animals," according to Chief Executive Officer Nancy B. McKenney.

The shelter handled 2,683 adoptions in 2012: 839 dogs, 1,049 cats and 795 small companions and farm animals.

The total number of incoming animals — rescued, stray or surrendered — continues to rise, up 17 percent this past year. The shelter has also had great success reuniting pets with their owners. Seventy-seven percent of stray dogs and 27 percent of stray cats that came to the shelter were reunited with their owners, compared to the estimated national average of 30 percent for dogs and 2 to 5 percent for cats.

Those are very satisfying numbers, says Chief Operating Officer John Reese. He attributes the society's success in part to the skills of more than 700 volunteers who do everything from data entry, foster care, helping connect people and animals in the busy adoption center, taking animals out to community groups and even helping shut-in seniors keep their beloved pets at home.

It's that last job that appealed to Dr. Barbara-Grace Pike, a retired family practice chiropractor who has been helping out for about four years. The Sausalito resident says she got involved with the humane society after she lost one of her own dogs.

"I wasn't ready to get a new one, but I knew I needed a reg-



Above: Volunteer Kim Bromley plays with 3-year old Parker to test his human interactions. Below: The society's adoption center allows potential owners to meet animals.



Kate Richardson walks a pair of dogs at the shelter.

Marin Humane Society

171 Bel Marin Keys Blvd. In Novato. (415) 883-4621. www.marin-humane-society.org. Residents can drop off injured or surrendered pets 24/7 at the back of the clinic.

Adoption Center: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday, until 6:30 p.m. Wednesday.

Front desk: 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday, until 7 p.m. Wednesday. Services include licensing, micro-chipping, redemptions and relinquishments.

Animal Outfitters shop: 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday
Spay-Neuter Clinic: 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Friday

Volunteers: Must be 18 years of age and older and willing to make a six-month commitment. (415) 506-6267.



Pike visits senior citizens at home, bringing food and kitty litter, walking pets and generally making sure the person isn't worried that their limitations may somehow hurt their pet.

Making up to 10 deliveries and stops a week, Pike says she has developed unique relationships with the seniors and their pets.

"It's just precious," she says. "People get worried that no one will be there to take care of their animals, and we try to assure them that no matter what happens, their pets will be taken care of."

Some of her clients are bed-ridden, others just not mobile

enough to walk or groom their dogs. Pike helps out, and enjoys the human and animal interactions she has.

"But I'm not a nail-clipper," she says.

Marin County is lucky, Pike said, because the shelter strives to find all pets not just a home, but a good ones. As a volunteer, Pike also takes advantage of the many services the society offers, including dog training.

"We are very comprehensive," agrees Reese. "We don't just move animals through here. We make sure they find a home that will be the right fit, and we provide ways to help humans continue to care for their animals.

Besides the dog training classes offered at the campus, the society provides several levels of agility training for dogs in its large hangar-like facility, as well as cat workshops: everything from environment enrichment, where cat owners learn fun ways to entertain their kitties, to Kitty Kindergarten, a playgroup for kittens, to basic cat training. Yes, cats can be trained.

It offers a public spay-neuter clinic, and an on-site hospital to care for sick and injured animals. The shelter also offers services to other animals in the area, including helping train police officers on how to work with their canines, and caring for show animals when a circus rolls into town. It also works with several other specialty wildlife rescue organizations in the area when raccoons, possums and other residents of Marin's animal population are injured or distressed.

Some of the society's volunteers include inmates in San Quentin prison. About 20 lower security inmates nearing parole work with dogs when they need

more socialization or medical rehab before they can be adopted, Reese says. The inmates play with and care for the dogs during animal visits to the prison.

Animals lovers will also rest easy knowing that the society does not believe in euthanasia, unless necessary. Reasons could include behavioral issues that cannot be rehabilitated, public safety issues or untreatable pain or suffering.

And there is always inventory, as twice a week staff members comb other animal shelters in the central valley, taking dogs and cats that other shelters can't accommodate.

And Reese himself isn't immune to the allure of the shelter's inventory. He and his wife Andrea, a vet technician at the society's on-site hospital, were adopted themselves by two cats, Bradley and Sheldon, who came through the doors.

"It's kind of hard to say no," he says.

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ular dog contact," she says. So she decided to give in to her two passions: animals and seniors.

She volunteers in the shelter's Side-by-Side, part of the society's SHARE program, dedicated to "Special Human-Animal Relationships." SHARE's services provide the support to ill or isolated people who "need to continue the help and comfort" a pet provides, Pike says.