

Animal Services' New Chief All about Finding Homes for the Furry Ones

Animal Shelter

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by Linda Fridy

first introduced it.

Someone looking for love this valentine season can find it in the furry, four-legged variety as Santa Cruz County Animal Services hosts a "Meet Your Match" pet adoption event on Feb. 12.

New general manager Melanie Sobel brought the idea from Chicago, where she

Sobel wants to find homes for the dogs, cats and rabbits housed in the agency's shelters.

These pets have either been found by or surrendered to Animal Services. The heart-breaking fact is that the agency gets more of these animals than it finds homes for, and that's the reason successful adoptions are a true cause for celebration.

The event is not just for people looking for a pet. "Meet Your Match" will offer much to enjoy, from a performance by barber shop quartet Constellation (featuring one of Animal Services' own officers) to valentine photos of owners and their adoptees.

Those who bring their pets can also take advantage of

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low-cost rabies shots and micro chipping.

Emptying the Cages

Sobel joined the agency in December as the new general manager — an agency that has seen much turnover at the top in recent years.

She is happy to encourage adoptions through events such as “Meet Your Match,” but her primary goal is to teach people how to keep animals from ever showing up at the agency’s two shelters. Or if they do, she wants abandoned animals spending as little time as possible there.

For pet owners, the simple solution is to have a pet micro chipped and wear identification.

“It’s a ticket home [for any runaway],” she said simply.

Sobel sees the advantages of microchipping constantly, but one incident stands out. She recalls a dog that came into a shelter in Milwaukee, where she most recently worked. When staff checked his microchip, it showed an owner in Alabama.

Turns out the dog had been stolen and the moment the owner got the call, she drove all the way to Milwaukee to get her pet.

“Seeing the animal and his owner reunited was incredible, just watching them and their reactions,” she said.

For dogs, having a license provides many benefits, and increasing the number of licensed dogs in Santa Cruz County is high on Sobel’s agenda for Santa Cruz County. Tags are also a proven way to reunite a dog and owner, and with records of rabies shots the dog does not have to be quarantined.

Licensing helps other animals, too.

“Revenue from licenses goes directly to our agency. It’s supporting the homeless animals in our community,” she said.

On any given day, the agency’s two shelters will have 20 to 30 adoptable dogs, as many as 40 cats and kittens during kitten season, and miscellaneous other animals from the small — rabbits, guinea pigs and birds — to large, such as horses and pigs.

“We never turn an animal away. It’s a safe haven,” she said.

Working with Heroes

Sobel understands how even careful owners and their pets can be separated.

“Things happen. Kids leave a gate open, a cat runs out an open door,” she said.

Her staff just wants to get pets home quickly.

She admits to being a bit surprised by the view some people in the community seem to have toward her newly adopted agency.

“There seems to be a bit of an aversion to law enforcement here, and we’re associated with it,” she said. “Our officers are really rescuers. They’re out there every day taking animals out of terrible situations. They should be thought of as heroes, because that’s what they are.”

Sobel is delighted to be working in a place where spaying and neutering pets is the law, since she sees the tragedy of pet overpopulation every day. Part of her education goal is to help people understand why animal advocates continue to keep this need front and center.

“Every animal you produce [by letting a pet breed], you are literally taking away a home from an animal in a shelter,” she said.

Spaying and neutering can also help address many of the issues that lead to animals being surrendered, she said. Unneutered male dogs are statistically more likely to bite. They also can smell a female dog in heat from two miles away, often a reason behind an escape.



Charlie, a three-year-old doberman pinscher mix, gave little Vinne a friendly sniff during the photo session. Charlie came to Animal Services as a victim of the economy when his owners had to move and could not keep him. Vinne is only about four weeks old and was taken from his mother too early, then surrendered to the shelter. Although he may not be ready for adoption by the Meet Your Match event, Animal Services has dogs of all ages and sizes looking for a good home, plus cats, rabbits and more.

Spaying and neutering also has health benefits, such as a reduced risk of certain cancers, she added.

Following a Personal Passion

Unlike many people in her industry, Sobel did not grow up surrounded by pets. Raised in the Chicago area, she pursued her love of animals by volunteering at shelters.

“I don’t know where I got it. It wasn’t my parents,” she said with a laugh.

She started working for Chicago’s parks department and got her first job in animal

services after working with that department developing dog parks.

“It was like being thrown into the fire,” she said of the shelter that handled 30,000 animals a year. Sobel has nothing but praise for the director she worked with for five and a half years and who taught her much about her trade.

While there, Sobel served as the foster parent for a shepherd mix brought in with a bloody front leg that had to be amputated. When he recovered, Milton was featured on the news and got many adoption requests.

He eventually went to a couple with plenty of room for him, and to this day, Sobel gets a Christmas card with a picture and update on Milton. His picture sits on her desk, along with photos of dogs she’s had through the years.

Stella, her 11-year-old lab and white shepherd mix, moved to Santa Cruz with Sobel, who admits she long harbored a desire to escape the cold of the Midwest. When asked what made her interested in the Santa Cruz job, she simply gestured out the window and laughed.

“I always knew I’d like to leave the Midwest and live in a place with natural beauty. Here, everything’s at your disposal,” she said, reveling in the variety from the nearby ocean and redwoods to skiing in the Sierras.

“I’ve worked in big cities and dense urban environments. It’s nice to be here,” she said.

She’s just as enthusiastic about her work environment.

“This is a beautiful shelter. I want to get the word out. It’s not a sad place where animals die. It’s very inviting, and the staff is excellent.”

And while she acknowledges that seeing the many cases of neglect, indifference and cruelty that come with work in animal services is difficult, she said those are balanced by the opportunity to see many dogs, cats and miscellaneous pets get a second chance at life in a loving home.

Her colleagues, both paid and volunteer, are great, too.

“People who love animals are the most incredible people in the world,” she said. ■

[Editor’s Note: Meet Your Match” runs from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Feb. 13 at Animal Services’ Live Oak shelter, 2200 7th Avenue. The agency also operates a second shelter in Watsonville at 580 Airport Boulevard.]