



Changing the World

ONE PET

AT A TIME

Animal Shelter

3/21/04

By **CHRIS WATSON** *Sentinel staff writer*

Usually, the dogs and cats taken in by the local animal shelter arrive one at a time.

But starting in the spring and continuing through the summer months, the pound explodes with animals, most of them kittens, many of them wild.

There are an estimated 30 million to 60 million feral cats in the United States, according to Diane Leigh and Marilee Geyer, author and photographer of "One at a Time — A Week in an American Animal Shelter."

The statistics these women have gathered on animal overpopulation are astounding.

Theoretically, they tell us, a single female cat and her kittens can expand the cat population by 400,000 animals in a mere seven years.

And every single month across the United States, half a million dogs and cats are euthanized, put to death, disposed of.

That's a lot of death.

But there is hope, they say. Statistics show this, too.

Back in the late '70s and early '80s, there were 17 million to 20 million animals passing through American shelters. Now, shelters house only 8 million to 12 million animals.

Leigh and Geyer believe that, with a strong

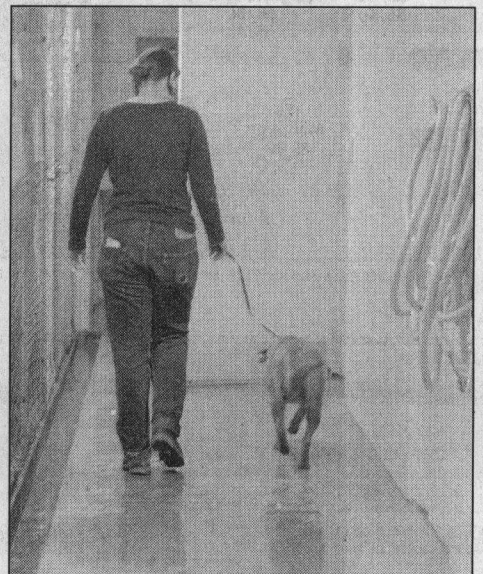
course of community education and by increasing low-cost medical and behavioral training programs, the death rolls at animal shelters can, some day, reach zero.

Their book is a step toward that magical number.

Putting a face to the numbers

Kelly was a beautiful golden husky female, probably older than 8 when she came to the Santa Cruz Animal Shelter during the week in 1999 that Leigh and Geyer were researching their book.

Her eyesight was somewhat diminished, her



Marilee Geyer/Contributed photos

TOP: Sadi was returned to the pound many times because she could not be confined. She was eventually adopted by a family with an older dog.

ABOVE: This stray female Chow mix is being walked for the last time. Four days after she was brought to the pound, the decision was made to put her down.

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Marilee Geyer/Contributed photos

This older cat was noted for having a 'super purr' according to staff records. The cat was adopted by an older lady.

Pound

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hips hurt her a little, but she'd made a good seeing-eye dog in her day and was lovable and well-behaved.

But her latest guardian wouldn't pay the \$20 to get her out of the shelter, arguing that "she'd only get out again." So Kelly was impounded.

Then euthanized. Leigh writes of the event:

"(Kelly's) grief was unmistakable. She did not eat, would not look up at anyone who stood in front of her kennel, did not lift her head as her photo was taken. She was so unresponsive, staff even wondered if she might be deaf. After three days, it was clear she was not going to bounce back from the trauma of being abandoned; puppies, even street dogs, do better in the shelter, having never known a home. It is the ones who had a home — the ones who have lost the most — who suffer the worst. And Kelly suffered immensely.

"Her very suffering sealed her fate, virtually guaranteeing that she would not be adopted."

"If the stories in the book hurt people, we consider that a good thing," Leigh said. "It shows they're not shut down emotionally."

Geyer agreed.

"That's the first step toward change," she said.

The numbers

The 75 animals featured in the book were chosen from the 363 that passed through the Santa Cruz Animal Shelter in a single week in 1999.

Of that number:

- 249 were brought in lost or stray.
- 97 were surrendered by their guardians.
- 14 were brought in for euthanasia due to illness or age.
- 3 were taken in under protective custody.
- 15 were found and claimed by their families.
- 6 were dead on arrival.
- 6 died after arriving.
- 2 were stolen.
- 2 were transferred to other shelters.
- 215 were adopted to new homes.
- 117 were euthanized.

You will fall in love with each animal profiled here.

And whether the animal was adopted, euthanized or reclaimed, you will also cry.

Each profile comes with a lesson still to be learned — about why putting ID tags on your pet helps other animals get adopted; why training your dog increases their longevity; why neutering your pet keeps them healthier; why the interview process to place an animal at the pound is so rigorous.

You might be surprised to learn that 25 percent of all dogs in shelters are pure-bred.

That 80 percent of all dogs hit by cars are unneutered males.

That only 2 percent of lost cats are reclaimed.

Or that a full one-third of all animals in shelters across this country are surrendered by their owners.

And, even if you've always adopted your pets from the pound, you might also be surprised to learn that only one animal in three has a home that lasts their entire life.

"There are no corporations or politicians lobbying against fixing the problems at the shelters," Leigh said. "It's one of the few issues that individuals can actually impact."

And fixing it, she writes, could go a long way in repairing other social ills.

"If our concern and compassion are so weak and limited that we are unable to save those animals closest to us, how will we ever be able to save the more distant beings — the endangered species we may never see, the redwoods and mountains and wilderness we may never visit, the suffering people we may never meet and whose misery we may never experience directly?"

Getting to zero

Leigh and Geyer's decision to self-publish their book was a calculated risk.

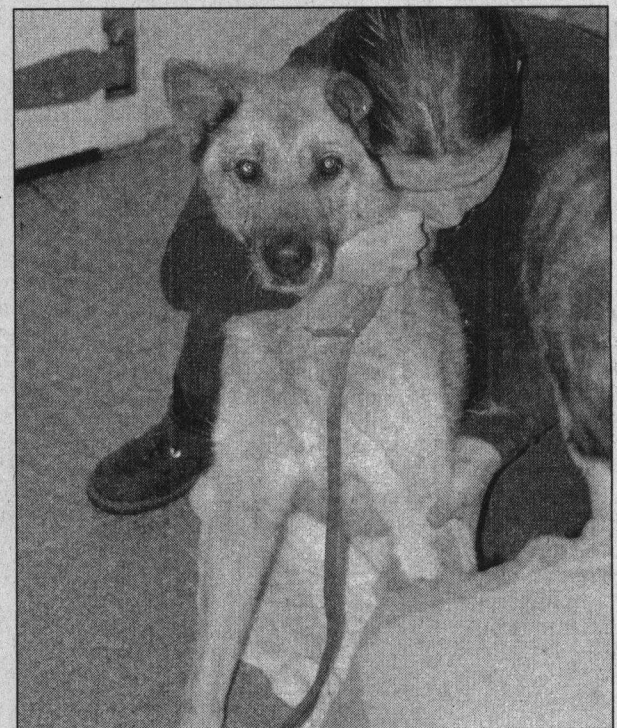
They'd been told by a number of publishing agents to take out some of the euthanasia stories if they wanted the book to sell well.

But the women — who have collaborated on pet education programs in Santa Cruz for more than a dozen years now — had no intention of changing the facts in the matter.

And in the three months since the book's initial publication, support has surpassed their expectations.

There was the phone call from actor Ed Begley Jr., the e-mail from author Sherman Alexie and rave reviews from the likes of Jeff Masson, author of "When Elephants Weep."

In addition, the book has been adopted by a rescue guild in Washington state, was purchased in bulk by a group in Pasadena for every member of their city council and, in



Kelly, a husky, was left at the shelter after she got out of her own yard. Because her owner did not want to pay a \$20 reclaim fee, she was never adopted.

Los Gatos, is being given out with every adoption.

For every animal lover who makes it through the book without flinching, the authors give thanks.

"This book was born out of the pain and grief of working in a shelter," Geyer said.

"The only way to ease that pain," Leigh added, "is to move closer to ending it."

"One at a Time — A week in an American Animal Shelter," by Diane Leigh and Marilee Geyer is available at local bookstores and from the nonprofit No Voice Unheard, P.O. Box 4171, Santa Cruz, CA 95063 or online at www.NoVoiceUnheard.org. All proceeds from sales of this book (\$16.95) will be used to support education programs about homeless animals.

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