

Animal Welfare

Helping dogs, one community at a time.

By Donna Jackel



Grassroots Animal Welfare



PAWS founder Matt Piccone (top right) greets a dog with a new dog house in Rochester; PAWS also offers wellness outreach (left); Austin's Emancipet (center) takes their mobile clinic on the road with educational and spay/neuter services; in Durham the Coalition to Unchain Dogs (right) builds fences to free dogs from tethering.

MATT PICCONE maneuvers his van through the streets of Rochester, a mid-sized city in upstate New York with the fifth-highest poverty rate in the nation. Beside him sits Hillary Cardin, a veterinary technician. He pulls the van to the curb in front of a beige, two-story, wood-frame house, and he and Cardin each grab an armful of straw from the back of the van. Piccone struggles to open a wooden gate obstructed by thick snow. Two Pit Bulls, Henny and Diamond, charge them.

“Hey, guys, get back in!” he shouts, hurriedly shutting the gate. As Piccone and Cardin drop the straw into two dog-houses, the dogs, tails wagging frantically, compete for attention. Henny steals a glove.

Cardin laughs at their exuberance. “Their energy level is a good sign. It means that they’re getting enough food to keep their body heat up in this weather.”

Before Piccone became a fixture in their lives, Henny and Diamond were underfed and had only a board slanted against the house for protection. The

doghouses, built by apprentices in the local carpenter’s union, are double-walled, fully insulated and raised six inches off the ground. The straw helps the dogs retain their body heat. “I climbed in a doghouse on a single-digit day and the temperature was 52 degrees,” says Piccone. The shorthaired dog nestled inside was warm to his touch.

The dogs’ owner, Anthony McBride, emerges from the house, wearing a wide smile. After some small talk, Piccone says, “Hey, Bro. Are you going to get Diamond spayed?” Henny is already

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neutered. The man nods, but is non-committal as to when. "This would be a good time of year to do it," Piccone offers, no trace of judgment in his voice.

Piccone is the founder of Providing Animal Welfare Services (PAWS) of Rochester (pawsofrochester.org), a fledgling animal welfare group. PAWS' motto is "outreach, education and assistance." By delivering doghouses and straw and providing free spay/neuter surgeries and low-cost vaccinations to city residents, PAWS has become a welcome presence in neighborhoods where pet owners can't afford health care for their animals. To receive the doghouses and other perks, people must agree to sterilize their pets. "Ninety percent of the time, it's a yes," says Piccone.

Not surprisingly, it's the backyard breeders who resist altering their pets.

"I might get a solid 'no' for a year, but I'll keep talking about it," Piccone says. One of his proudest accomplishments was convincing a woman who had been breeding Pit Bulls for 20 years to have her three dogs altered and allow them to live inside. "Pointing fingers will get you nowhere," says Piccone. "It's a matter of time, patience, asking the right questions and knowing how to ask them."

Before PAWS, Piccone worked as a security technician for Time Warner Cable. His job was to drive around city neighborhoods and locate households illegally tapping into cable services. Peering into back yards, Piccone, an animal lover, was often disturbed by what he saw: dogs tied on short chains, dogs who were sick and malnourished or who had fresh wounds from dog

fighting. Dead animals dumped at the curb also haunted him.

For eight years, he made thousands of complaint calls to animal control and the local humane society. Either help never came, or a dog would be removed from the home, only to be replaced. "I was directly affected by what I saw," Piccone says. "There was a lack of compassion for [poor] people. They had been written off as bad pet owners."

One frigid winter day, Piccone saw two dogs in a back yard, one in a metal crate with a plastic bag over it, and a second lying on concrete, covered by a wooden box with no bottom. Piccone called animal control. "I was crying. I insisted someone come down." The animal control officer who came said the shelters were sufficient.

Piccone rang the front doorbell. "I

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was afraid the dog's skin would freeze to the concrete. I was so overcome with emotion I didn't even know what I was going to say," he recalls. When a man opened the door, Piccone blurted, "Your dogs can't live outside like that. Can I bring you two doghouses?"

Piccone and his father built the doghouses in less than a week, and PAWS was born. Two years later, Piccone and Cardin are still the only paid employees; Piccone's wife, Laura, volunteers as the group's grant writer/office manager. But with local donations and almost \$130,000 from the national ASPCA, PAWS now operates a mobile spay/neuter clinic and a standing clinic, which provides wellness care (vaccinations, deworming, etc.) for \$25 per visit. By June, Piccone plans to begin offering at the clinic high-volume, high-quality spay/neuter services, free to city residents. In less than two years, the nonprofit has sterilized 139 dogs and 55 cats. The ASPCA liked PAWS' "caring, personalized approach to helping at-risk animals in the community," says Jill Van Tuyl, a community initiatives director. "In a typical animal control response, the animal would be removed from the home and placed in the already overburdened shelter system. By offering ongoing support and education ... PAWS is giving pet owners the resources they need to care for their pets and keep them in the home."

Community-Based Help

PAWS is one of many grassroots animal welfare organizations partnering with the ASPCA and the HSUS to keep pets safe, healthy and in their homes, and to dramatically increase spay/neuter rates in communities without veterinary care.

The ASPCA created its Safety Net program in 2008 to enlist the public in reducing the number of abandoned animals. Initiatives include free and low-cost sterilizations, vaccinations, and online animal-behavior and rehoming advice.

Sterilization is a cornerstone of the campaign. Last year, the ASPCA awarded



Young participants in Emancipet's rabies drive

more than \$5 million to grassroots organizations for spay/neuter programs, and that amount will increase each year, says Emily Weiss, PhD, the organization's vice president of shelter research and development. The euthanasia rate is decreasing, but as many as four million pets are still destroyed in shelters each year. This is a rough estimate, as there is no central registry to track data, Weiss says.

To spend money most efficiently, the ASPCA is using a new geographic information system that pinpoints the neighborhoods sending the most dogs and cats to shelters. Those areas are then targeted for intervention. ASPCA staff have also conducted in-person surveys to find out why people surrender large dogs, who are the least adoptable and the most likely to be euthanized, says Weiss. At a Washington, D.C., shelter, pet owners cited a shortage of affordable housing that allowed dogs weighing more than 30 pounds. While this was also a problem in New York City, a larger issue was a shortage of low-cost veterinary care.

Austin, Texas, has become a model for reducing shelter deaths through aggressive spay/neuter services. The city's per capita shelter intake is currently at its lowest in its history, and the number of homeless animals coming into the shelter each year has dropped

from 23,351 in 2000 to 18,668 in 2013, says Amy Mills, chief executive officer of Emancipet (emancipet.org), Austin's community-based spay/neuter and preventive care organization. These feats are impressive, given that Austin's human population nearly doubled between 1990 and 2014, from less than 500,000 to 859,814, according to Austin officials. Mills credits this progress to the city's emphasis on prevention efforts and a strong collaboration between Emancipet, the ASPCA, the city of Austin, Animal Trustees of Austin and the Austin Humane Society, a nonprofit shelter.

In 2005, Emancipet built a clinic with money from the city, PetSmart Charities and a local foundation called Impact Austin. In 2013, they opened a second clinic in Pflugerville, just north of Austin. The organization also operates two mobile clinics that cover a 70-mile radius, providing free spaying and neutering and other low-cost services four days a week. The city subsidizes most of the free services provided by Emancipet through a contract.

Using ASPCA data, Emancipet targets areas with the most homeless animals and complaint calls. "The real barriers are cost, understanding the [sterilization] procedure and trusting medical care," Mills says. "What we're finding is that vet care is not part of their family neighborhood culture. They never saw their parents take pets to vet."

However, a little education goes a long way in changing attitudes. "We tell them their pet will have a longer, happier life and [the surgery] will keep them from having unwanted pets," says Mills. "Some dog owners are worried the surgery will be painful. When I tell them we have good docs and pain meds, they're okay."

To reach more people, Mills and staff began attending Austin's free rabies drives, approaching owners who brought their unaltered dogs. "When I asked people if they had ever heard of Emancipet, almost everyone said yes," Mills recalls. "And when we offered to

have their dogs fixed that day, 90 agreed and another 100 followed up the next week. Most people don't say no when you are offering them a free surgery, right now, today.

"We feel now that we have infrastructure to get to anybody. Pet owners are having good experiences. They are treated with dignity and respect. We love their pets. We want to give them an incredible experience so their friends and neighbors will come."

Emancipet was there for Maria Shofestall and her five cats when she couldn't afford veterinary care. "You don't have to make an appointment or spend lots of money," she says. "They care about the animals, not about the profit." Now, Shofestall volunteers for Emancipet, driving people and their pets to the clinic.

The ASPCA has given Emancipet a grant to replicate their clinic model in other communities using a state-of-the-art semi-mobile clinic facility. In February, the group opened a new clinic in Killeen, Texas. "Once that clinic is sustainable, we'll transition into a permanent location and then we'll go on to the next community," says Mills. "We have something amazing here—if we can export [it], we can save lives."

Pockets of Poverty

When Amanda Arrington was growing up in rural eastern Texas, chained dogs were just part of the scenery. "You grow up thinking it's completely normal," she recalls. "It's all you know. My grandfather chained his dogs."

Arrington is now founder and executive director of the Coalition to Unchain Dogs (unchaindogs.net), a Durham, N.C.-based organization that builds fences for low-income pet owners so dogs can exercise freely in their back yards. Owners must also agree to have their dogs sterilized.

An articulate, tireless advocate for animals, Arrington is also director of Pets for Life, an HSUS program that is improving access to veterinary care in underserved communities. Pets for Life staff run outreach programs in four



Six-year-old Gentry and one-year-old Brownie now have a safe place where they can play together with the help of the Coalition to Unchain Dogs.

cities, providing sterilization, vaccination and other services. And through a partnership with PetSmart Charities, Pets for Life provides in-depth training and grants to animal welfare organizations in 19 additional cities. The program altered 16,000 pets in 2012 and 2013.

Says Arrington, "If you are living in poverty, you [often] don't have a car; the closest vet may be 10 miles away. You can't take pets on public transportation. If people are struggling, their pets will struggle too. Even a \$25 spay or neuter is out of reach for some people."


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For many dog lovers, it's incomprehensible to think of leaving a four-legged friend outside in extreme weather. But boots-on-the-ground animal activists know it's a mistake to judge someone until you've walked in their shoes. "It's really about making a human connection... inspiring trust," says Amy Mills. "People have a lot going on in their lives. It's our job to be kind, nonjudgmental friends."

Matt Piccone has no doubt that Anthony loves Henny and Diamond.

He also knows that Anthony's landlord won't permit the dogs in the two-family house. If the dogs are removed, there's a good chance they will end up in a shelter and be euthanized. In the meantime, Piccone tries to make the dogs comfortable, safe and healthy—and sterile.

On January 7, with wind chill driving the temperature down to -34 degrees, all Rochester schools were closed for the day. The cold was so severe, said the local meteorologist, that bare hands could sustain frostbite within five minutes. That morning, Piccone received calls that three dogs were outside in non-insulated shelters. He got in his van to bring them straw, gave the dog owners information about PAWS and took down their contact information. "I see it as an opportunity to move in and talk to people about why their pets are outside and give them an opportunity to get their pets inside," he says.

Piccone cannot forget the hours he spent sitting in his cable truck feeling helpless. "I had a list of 500 houses where dogs needed help," he says. "Now I have something to offer people." 

Donna Jackel is a freelance journalist specializing in animal welfare, health and caregiving.