



Giving Back

The La Plata County Humane Society

by Jen Reeder

Earlier this year, a pit-bull mix named Simon landed in the La Plata County Humane Society's animal shelter when his family moved. For about six months, he seemed depressed and uninterested in engaging with other dogs or people at the LPCHS.

Luckily, the shelter's team didn't give up on Simon. An animal behaviorist worked with him and shared his story on Facebook. Then, Durango residents Stephanie and Brian Erickson decided their dog, Bailey, might like a pal. It was meant to be. "Simon got attached to us right away," Stephanie says. "It just worked."

Simon is one of approximately 3,000 animals rescued each year by the venerable nonprofit that has served Durango for 46 years. A contract with the city and county provides about 20 percent of the shelter's funding, while revenue from the adjacent thrift store and private donations covers the rest.

"We're an open-admission shelter," says Chris Nelson, LPCHS



director of animal services. "That means we take anything that comes to our door." While the bulk of the animals are dogs and cats, the shelter also accepts "pocket pets" — like guinea pigs, turtles, rabbits and snakes — and even finds new homes for horses. And best of all, the facility hasn't had to euthanize a dog because of space constraints in almost 10 years.

"This isn't your grandpa's animal shelter," Nelson says with a grin, referencing the tremendous improvements made at animal shelters in the last decade. The key, she says, is low-cost spay/neuter plans and innovative programs that help pets get adopted into the community. For example, in the "Read to a Dog" program, volunteers take shelter dogs into local schools so that children can gain confidence by reading to a nonjudgmental canine listener — while the dogs bask in the attention. At the juvenile-detention center, youth learn how to train dogs. That program teaches kids responsibility and the dogs learn obedience skills that

help them get adopted. Middle-school students with learning disabilities play with shelter dogs to foster self-esteem and behavioral boundaries in both the kids and the dogs.

Volunteers take adoptable dogs on hikes through another program called “Mutts on the Mountains” to practice for outdoor adventures, a way of life in Durango. Because older pets can be overlooked, the humane society introduced “Seniors for Seniors,” in which adoption fees for dogs and cats over the age of 7 are waived for people age 60 and better. Each summer, the Kids Kamp program introduces campers to the different jobs at the refuge, from veterinary care to working with dogs in the play yard. All the programs teach that animals need to be respected and only treated with kindness.

The team at LPCHS works not only to adopt animals, but to keep pets in their homes. The shelter offers a free “courtesy hold” for



Harvey



Reeder

pets of people entering the hospital, homeless shelter or domestic-violence safehouse. During last summer’s Lightner Creek Fire, the humane society sheltered 33 dogs and cats from evacuated homes until they could be reunited with their families.

Emily Phillips, group marketing and development coordinator, said Durango’s pet-loving community is strong. It’s reflected by the commitment of more than 100 active volunteers, donations from individuals and organizations like Durango’s natural pet-treat company Zuke’s, and the camaraderie between local animal-welfare groups. For instance, Wolfwood Refuge, a nonprofit sanctuary for wolves and wolf-dogs, hosts free tours for Kids Kamp each summer. Other cooperating organizations are Lisa Parker’s Puppies, Annie’s Orphans and the Animal Connection.

While saving lives is serious, it can also be fun. Fundraisers like the *Bow Wow Film Festival* bring the community together to laugh and cry at short films about dogs. The shelter’s biggest annual fundraiser, *Bark and Wine*, features national speakers, dinner and a silent auction — as well as a canine fashion show. “We have wonderful community support,” Phillips says. “And the people who work here love the animals; we want to see them with good homes and good people. It’s extremely rewarding work.”

The La Plata County Humane Society is at 1111 S. Camino del Rio in Durango, or online at: www.lpchumanesociety.org. ■



LPCHS



LPCHS



La Plata County Humane Society

Durango resident Jen Reeder became a self-proclaimed “crazy dog lady” after she and her husband adopted a Labrador-retriever mix named Rio. She is president of the Dog Writers Association of America.