

Taking the Public Inside

Former shelter workers harness the power of the personal to show the public the world behind the statistics of animal homelessness —and help them understand how they can change it

DIANE LEIGH has to look no further than the letter taped to her wall to see the impact she is making. Written by an Illinois animal advocate, the note is the most gratifying she has received since the publication of the book she co-authored with Marilee Geyer: *One at a Time: A Week in an American Shelter*.

"I've been thinking that with our organization I need to build a no-kill shelter," the admiring fan wrote. "That has been our goal. After reading your book I realize that what we need to do is preventative work to keep animals from needing shelter. And so we've changed our direction."

The responses from shelter workers have been no less enthusiastic, with one writing to say, "Even though I'm on the front lines, this helped bring me back to why I do it and what I'm doing."

"I guess we struck that balance well because shelter workers feel, so far, well-represented by it," says Leigh, who together with Geyer is offering deep discounts to animal organizations that would like to use the book as a tool in their community. "They've been some of our biggest supporters. We have shelters who are selling it as part of their merchandise. We have one shelter that used it as a Christmas gift to the media and the donors that helped them in the last year. And we have a little rescue group that's giving it with each adoption that they do. People are taking it and running with it."

But while validating, motivating, and sometimes therapeutic for shelter workers, the book is intended for the general public—for the millions of people out there who have enough compassion to care but not enough knowledge to understand what to do about it. Startling in its honesty, yet overflowing with compassion for animals and the people who care for them, this book is unlike any other that has ever been written about animal homelessness.

Its power lies not just in the compelling prose but in the way it's presented: through the individual stories of 75 dogs and cats who entered a California shelter in one week. By following the animals on their journeys from relinquishment through holding periods, adoption, fostering, euthanasia, or returns, the book shows rather than tells, pleads rather than preaches. It is both a tribute to the deep commitment of the people of the animal protection field and a cry for help to the public. The section on euthanasia quotes a statement from a shelter that could also be used to describe the mission of *One at a Time*: "Our policy: to tell the truth. Our goal: to change the truth we have to tell."

Starting with an introduction that adeptly and compellingly describes the diversity and breadth of animal sheltering issues in four pages, the book commands attention and then proceeds to dispel long-held myths about animals and the people and institutions that care for them. Former shelter workers them-

selves, Leigh and Geyer know what they're talking about—and they understand how controversial it is to put it into writing on such a grand scale. They don't hold back, yet they never cast blame, presenting each story to the reader as a mirror of society's profound missteps in their attitudes toward companion animals.

Readers of *One at a Time* will come away from the book knowing things all sheltering professionals wish they could explain better to friends, family, and the public at large. They will understand that shelters are struggling with a problem they did not create, and that using the word "no kill" to distinguish between



extra scoop

one shelter and another misses the critical point: that euthanasia is still necessary in nearly every community to keep up with overwhelming numbers. They will see all the beautiful faces of animal homelessness that shelter workers look into every day: the stray pit mix named Molly who succumbed to kennel stress, the Keeshond named Cleopatra whose people almost didn't find her in time because she had no I.D., the orange tabby named Pumpkin Pie whose foster family nursed her back to health from a URI and decided to adopt her, and the eight-year-old golden husky mix named Kelly whose owner balked at a \$20 reclaim fee and left her in the care of the shelter.

Through these and other intimately told and illustrated tales, Leigh and Geyer impart virtually every lesson of responsible pet ownership, describing in detail the benefits of spaying and neutering, the importance of I.D., the critical reasons for keeping cats safely confined, and the importance of long-term commitment. But they do much more, explaining over and

over again why the shelter is only a temporary place for animals and how hard staff work to ward off disease, kennel stress, depression, and aggression among animals. Through stories like that of Pumpkin Pie, they explain why some cats are luckier than others, why URI outside the shelter is just a cold but URI within the shelter can be a matter of life and death.

Readers find out just how difficult it is to work in an animal shelter—how mentally and emotionally challenging it is to care for so many creatures, watch so many lose their lives, and still keep the faith. Excerpts from animal records are short on words but long on love, showing the meticulous labor and hope that goes into each animal. Even the reasons behind adoption counseling are explained in a sensitive and eye-opening way, showing the reading public that



staff are not trying to “grill” them but just trying to make good matches and prevent further trauma for the animal.

In the midst of all the sadness, there is so much hope, epitomized by the stories like “Mother Cat,” the tale of a stray gray cat whose babies had to be euthanized for URI but who later happily accepted a healthy, orphaned litter as her own. And some of the people

Q&A with Book Co-author Diane Leigh

How did you come up with the idea for this book?

When I was working in a shelter it was just something I was sort of playing around with. And it was sort of in my mind for years—it's like a calling to do it. I had been out of shelter work but still doing work on the issues.

When I was working in a shelter I always wanted to take people by the hand and take them behind the scenes and say, “This is what it means to take in 75 kittens in a day. This is what it means to have 60 dogs in the same building.” And I always thought if you could just show people the individuals and make it really personal, you could get into their hearts and then educate their heads.

In telling the stories of the animals, you are also teaching without preaching. It seems that was a very deliberate format?

We figured that every animal had a lesson to teach, and we tried in every situation to say, “This is how this animal got here. This is how it could have been avoided.” And to imply, “This is what would prevent it.” There are some

stories that are a little more—I don't know what you'd call them—just sort of artistic. But we wanted to kind of embed the facts into the animals' stories because we thought they'd be absorbable that way by the general public.

I've thought of this book as my prayer. I think of it as a prayer for the animals and for a better world. And all along what I've believed is that these animals in this book who I'm very attached to—that their spirits have power and if I could get them out into the world, they would make change. But I wanted to put them out there in a really beautiful, dignified format. I wanted to show them as sacred.

The book is so beautifully done that I was amazed you had completed the project without the backing of a publisher. Why did you self-publish it?

We had several agents and publishers who were very interested—good-hearted people who cared about the issue and who were interested, but they were concerned about the difficult material and about sort of the overall tone of sadness. We think it reflects what goes on in an animal shelter—some of the stories are

really sad, some of them have happy endings, but still it's hard. But they were concerned about the profitability of the book that included that hard material that no one else has ever put in book form, and in one way or another tried to talk us out of including it. And we in the beginning had made a commitment to the animals to tell the full truth and to not turn away from the hard stories—and to try and tell the public that you can't change what you can't see. And the first step to changing this is facing it.

I noticed you made no mention anywhere in the book of the specific site of your project. That must have been deliberate as well?

We did that on purpose because we wanted anyone who was reading it to understand that this was a typical shelter. It's actually the Santa Cruz SPCA in Santa Cruz here. But I'm from the Midwest, and I know what Midwesterners think of California, and especially Santa Cruz has a reputation for being really out there and kind of wild. And we didn't want any affiliation that anybody reading it could say, “Oh, geez, that's California,” or something like that. And the Santa Cruz SPCA

the end of the song "A Day in the Life" was a special tribute from the Beatles to all their canine fans.

described in the book restore faith in humankind: There are touches of sweetness in stories like the one about the older couple who decided after much thought to adopt—and then said in response to an adoption counselor's suggestion that their new overweight, six-year-old dog could use an exercise routine: "Hmmm . . . so could we."

Here is that long-awaited, rare book that manages to walk the fine line of telling the public the truth without blaming or accusing those who are trying to change it the most—and without falling off the tightrope into an abyss of back-and-forth arguments or seemingly impossible solutions. Like so many shelter workers, the authors made a decision to sometimes use the word "killing" to describe what society is doing to its animals as a whole, yet they never once refer to euthanasia that way in describing the tales of individual people and animals. The book is insistent but reasoned in its arguments for change from each person, showing how quickly one deci-

sion not to neuter, not to train, not to commit—but most of all not to love—can burden the sheltering system and add to the tragedy.

"Basic, yet powerful solutions are in our hands," write the authors. "Shelters should be leaders in the battle to end the homeless animal tragedy, but they cannot end it for us. Shelters should, and must create programs that reach out beyond their walls to prevent animals from becoming homeless—identification and microchipping programs, low cost spay/neuter, pet parenting classes and animal behavior help, for instance—but we must use these programs. We are the ones who must make the commitment, take the actions, to ensure we never cause an animal to be in an animal shelter."

To order *One at a Time*, visit www.novoice-unheard.org. The cover price is \$16.95, but Leigh and Geyer are offering the book at a 50 percent discount to shelters, rescue/place-ment groups, and educational organizations.

—Nancy Lawson



*Diane Leigh (left)
with co-author Marilee Geyer*

and kittens and this many strays and this many owner-surrenders. Is that reflective of the bigger picture?" And darned if it didn't turn out to be so. So it really was random, and it really did turn out to be a good representation. It might look like we said, "Okay, now we need an animal given up because of 'moving,' but we didn't."

How did the shelter workers respond to your presence during the project?

We had really incredible people that we were working with at the shelter who gave us really extensive access. We [used to be] shelter workers, so we know. But they let us shadow them, and they used software systems there, and their practice was to record extensive comments in the animals' records about how the animals were doing. And we used a lot of that, and there were times when we were struggling with how to say something, and it just turned out that all we needed to do was let the shelter worker say it out of the record. They said it better than we ever could have.

is not running a shelter anymore, but during the time that it was, it really was typical. A little bit progressive—their work with pit bulls and stuff was on the progressive side—but it really was kind of a typical shelter.

Many more animals came through the shelter that week than you could fit into the book. How did you choose?

We thought that if you took a random selection of animals that you would have a crosscut of the situation. And we really did find that to be true. We took a kind of random selection, and then at a certain point we said to ourselves, "Okay, we have this many cats and this many dogs and this many adult animals and this many puppies

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