

# Off Leash



DANIEL JOHNSON/CHRONICLE-TRIBUNE

## An Exercise in Empathy

To increase donations and adoptions at her local shelter, a volunteer lived the doggy life for a month

BY CARRIE ALLAN

**A**s a dedicated volunteer for the Marion-Grant County Humane Society in Marion, Indiana, Cheryl Walker already knew the inner workings of the shelter pretty well. A board member for two years, she'd cleaned the aging facility, worked in the office, and provided foster care.

But in September, Walker had an idea that would make her a real insider—in a way few shelter volunteers or even staff ever plan to be.

"It all seemed very, very hopeless one day when I was out there. Our building is just falling apart, and we're nonprofit, and I couldn't seem to get anybody to listen to me," she says. "And I went home and I was just really upset and went to bed and curled up in a ball and said to myself, 'You think it's bad for you, you ought to be one of the dogs.'"

And Walker decided to do just that. After getting support from her family, she suggested her idea to the shelter's board: She would go canine.

Walker's family drove her to the shelter and "relinquished" her to the organization. She moved into a kennel, committing to 30 days of confinement that included

no family visits, sleeping and eating in the cage, and leaving only to shower and help out around the shelter. She hoped her presence in the kennels would encourage people to think about the animals who live there every day—enough to inspire them to donate and adopt.

Shelter staff were thrilled with the project and its potential to shine a light on the state of the facility and the plight of the animals within, says Walker. "We thought if nothing else, it would get people out there to see me," she says, "because I'm a crazy woman in a kennel."

And sure enough, people who'd never been to the shelter before showed up during Walker's period of confinement—some to gawk, others to adopt. "We got 110 dogs out in 30 days, and that is phenomenal for us. ... Normally we were lucky to get three a week," Walker says. "And out of that, we managed to get 20 big dogs. Now, we don't get three big dog adoptions in a month. We just don't. So to get 20 out, I was absolutely thrilled with that part."

Walker set an astronomical goal of raising \$3 million—much more than the \$8,000 actually raised during her shelter stay. Even though she's back home with

her family, she won't consider herself "adopted" until she brings in more money. "I'm only in foster care," she says.

Though the money didn't pour in as anticipated, the long-term effects of her stay may be just what the shelter needed. Moved by what they saw when they visited the facility toward the end of Walker's kenneling, local firefighters offered to help build a new facility using their own construction skills and the free labor of friends who can perform plumbing, electric work, and construction. "I was bawling when they told me," Walker says.

The adoptions and her new hope for coming changes made the month worthwhile, she says. But it was exhausting. During the first few days, the dogs didn't know her and kept her awake with their constant barking. The hardest thing was not seeing her family, who didn't visit because of Walker's desire to emulate the experience of dogs left behind.

While isolation provided insight into the loneliness of kenneled pooches, Walker's feelings about what dogs experience in the shelter aren't all negative. Dogs who've been cared for and house-trained by families may find the shelter terrible and frightening, she says. "But for some of those dogs, it's the best home they've ever known," she adds. "Some of them have been without food or water, have been abused or neglected or abandoned. In the time I was there, on five different occasions, [the shelter] went into homes where people had left these animals for weeks on end."

After 30 days of shelter life, Walker went home and immediately burned her shoes, threw her clothes in the washing machine, and took a good long shower "with flea shampoo," she says. And while the experience was tough, she's quick to point out that the dogs have it tougher—and to give credit to the humans who made her pet project possible. "I actually have three children, and my best friend was stuck with the children and the six dogs ..." she says, laughing, "so I think maybe I got the easier part of the deal." **AS**