

The Gulf Coast Will Rise Again

Two years after Katrina, signs of progress are everywhere

BY HEATHER CAMMISA

At one Louisiana animal shelter, a single employee takes care of some 2,000 dogs and cats a year. At another, the staff converts old school buses into storage sheds for food, cleaning supplies, and dog and cat crates.

In Mississippi shelters, employees often rely on prisoners to lay tile, help care for animals, and build comfortable resting platforms to keep pooches off cold shelter floors. One humane organization in the central part of the state operates in an area so poor that every student in the local elementary school is eligible for a free lunch.

As the former director of the Jersey Shore Animal Center in Ocean County, N.J., I know that shelters all over the country care for endless streams of animals on shoestring budgets. But my recent travels to the Gulf Coast for The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) gave me new appreciation for the resourcefulness of those who do the job in regions still plagued by poverty and indiscriminate dog and cat breeding.

My journey began as part of an ongoing effort to curb pet overpopulation in the communities hardest hit by Hurricane Katrina. Through a partnership between The HSUS and Maddie's Fund, a grant-making foundation dedicated to ending animal homelessness, we are collecting data on behavior and attitudes that we hope will ultimately shape strategies for overcoming people's resistance to spaying and neutering. In exchange for grants ranging from \$10,000 to \$20,000, 54 shelters in Louisiana and Mississippi have committed to tracking and reporting their intake and disposition numbers from 2005 to 2010.

One of the first tasks in this project—called "After Katrina: Improving the Lives of Gulf Coast Dogs and Cats"—involved visiting with staff and volunteers at partic-

ipating shelters. Over the course of four months, I flew from New Jersey to the Gulf Coast seven times, logged 8,500 rental-car miles, and visited shelter leaders from Lake Charles, La., to Corinth, Miss.

Any apprehensions I had about meeting with strangers in a somewhat strange land—at least to this born-and-bred Yankee—melted away as shelter staff welcomed me with open arms and invited me into their homes. I discovered that Southern hospitality is alive and well, even among the porcine set: A once-homeless boar, now happily re-homed with the president of one shelter's board of directors, could sit, lie down, heel, and even partially roll over before his enormous girth got the better of him.

That boar was a well-fed animal in an area where many critters live leanly. Mississippi has the highest poverty rate in the nation, Louisiana the third highest, and enormous areas of both states have no shelters at all. Many of the shelters that do exist are struggling to return to pre-Katrina norms even as their local populations rise; the arrivals of relocating evacuees place new pressures on their already limited ability to care for unwanted dogs and cats. And all but one of the shelters I visited were overrun with puppies—a startling contrast to animal populations in the North, where some animal shelters actually import juvenile animals to meet adopters' desires for younger dogs.

Even with the overwhelming numbers these shelters face, I saw reason for hope everywhere I visited. New or nearly new facilities have sprung up or are in the works in New Orleans, Gulfport, Vicksburg, and



In Olive Branch, Miss., veterinarian Isis Johnson and her team created a mobile spay/neuter unit inside this vintage-1972 bus. HEATHER CAMMISA/THE HSUS

Jackson. Other shelters had made major improvements to their facilities. More than half were performing pediatric spay/neuter surgeries. These progressive initiatives send a powerful message to local communities: Animals matter.

Many shelter leaders told me they've long hoped for national attention to their plight. They're getting it now. The After Katrina project includes a \$2 million social marketing initiative focused on spaying and neutering. And we're helping the region prepare for the next time disaster strikes by donating \$600,000 to the Dixon Correctional Institute, a medium-security prison in Jackson, La., which will have the capacity to operate as an emergency animal shelter and medical clinic during future disasters.

Many challenges lie ahead, but working together, I know we can tip the scales in favor of our human and animal friends in Louisiana and Mississippi. **AS**

Heather Cammisa is a research associate in The HSUS's research and analysis section. To read more about the "After Katrina" project, visit humanesociety.org/disaster.