JOANNA BUNDROS

People Power

BY JENNIFER ROTHACKER

Barbara Thrasher

Position: With help from Beverly Marshman, Barbara Thrasher started and now runs BONES (Better Options for Neglected Strays) Pet Rescue in the economically depressed area of Covelo, California, home to several Native American tribes. For 30 years, BONES has taken in stray animals and placed them in foster care until a permanent home is found.

Getting the word out: At first, Thrasher took in strays as she discovered them: puppies abandoned in a ditch, cats wandering the streets. Then, she and her volunteers held educational sessions about pet rescue. Other people in Covelo paid attention, especially the children's groups she spoke to, and they would summon her when they found strays. Now, BONES has grown so much that it actually goes *to* animal shelters and takes home some of the most desperate cases—dogs who can't walk, blind cats, elderly pets. She and a team of dedicated volunteers regularly house about 100 animals in their homes.

How this nice lady suddenly found herself caring for scores of animals: As a child, Thrasher always loved animals. She was a member of a 4-H club, volunteered at the petting zoo, spent time with her grandparents' horses. But she never planned a career in rescuing animals—until she discovered Covelo. She, her husband, and her two kids used to live near Los Angeles, but crime, lousy schools, and decreasing space to house their own pets prompted them to search for a new home. They fell in love with the open spaces and jaw-dropping beauty of Covelo. "We wanted a place that wasn't going to outgrow us and change. It hasn't," she says. When Thrasher saw the desperate state of so many animals there, she couldn't help but take them in.

Looking for love: In the early days of BONES, there weren't a lot of options for placing the animals. Many people in Covelo couldn't take them, living in such lean conditions themselves, and the nearest town was an hour away. But with the advent of the Internet, adopting the animals out has become much easier for BONES. "We sent a three-legged dog to New Jersey, two dogs to Maine, a paraplegic dog to Texas," Thrasher says. BONES adopts out about 25 cats and 200 dogs a year.

A bareBONES budget: As a fairly small group, BONES doesn't have the name recognition needed to rake in major donations. Somebody had been donating food, but that source just dried up. Last year, the group received a small grant, which helped but only went so far. The HSUS's Rural Area Veterinary Services (RAVS) and its director, veterinarian Eric Davis, have been instrumental in BONES's success, Thrasher says. RAVS travels to Covelo a few times a year for free spaying and neutering. Vets in other towns (sometimes as far as two hours away) give discounts for surgeries. Thrasher doesn't make a living in animal protection. Rather, she often winds up donating her own money. To make ends meet, she's mowed lawns, painted houses, and groomed dogs.

What others say about Thrasher: Davis calls Thrasher his "hero," an "entirely amazing person" who years ago introduced him to the notion that many people in remote areas are unable to access, let alone afford, veterinary care for their pets. "I would not be doing what I do now—RAVS would not exist—if it weren't for Barbara Thrasher," he says. "It's hard to impress upon somebody just how much she has done and how quietly." In her area, Davis says, Thrasher is "the de facto humane society, veterinary nurse, animal abuse investigator."

The fate of Gilbert and friends: As much of an animal lover as Thrasher is, she can't claim one pet as her own these days. "If I can find a better home than I can provide, I try to do that because that means I can take another one in." That's meant some sad goodbyes. Thrasher fell in love with Gilbert, a 4½-pound paraplegic dog (shown above). She even built him his own wheelchair. But then somebody who had just lost a paraplegic pet showed interest in adopting Gilbert. "I try to let them go where they would be happier."

Thrasher built a wheelchair for Gilbert before placing him in a new home.