

Sharing Light with the Other America

The director of The HSUS's Animal Sheltering Issues section finds Brazilian animal advocates bursting with energy

BY KIM INTINO

In October of 2007, I had the honor of delivering a presentation entitled "Shelter Management in the United States" at a seminar held by the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA) in São Paulo, Brazil. WSPA's Brazilian animal protection program consists of 75 member societies, 13 of which operate shelters throughout the country; the remainder administer programs such as spay/neuter, fostering, adoptions, and educational outreach.

Although member societies rarely turn animals away, they do not actively encourage people to bring them in; they feel that would be promoting abandonment. Strong adoption programs are scarce, and most member societies do not perform euthanasia. Once animals enter shelters, they are often housed indefinitely; most shelters are crowded and stressful.

Most member societies do not believe in traditional kennel housing. In fact, they abhor the thought of animals living in

cages, so the animals live in colony situations. These shelters—and those that close their doors and turn animals away when full—are faring better than most.

When WSPA staff presented a talk on compassion fatigue and invited people to speak, a few said that when their facilities become full, they bring animals into their homes. Some have nearly 100 animals and are regarded by their peers as hoarders. Many acknowledged their judgment is often clouded by their love for animals, and some admitted they pray to St. Francis because they cannot resist taking them in—even those who are very sick, injured, or aggressive.

Many said they felt frustrated and depressed by the endless stream of animals and the monumental task of caring for them. Workers sometimes experience relief when the animals die from natural causes. When discussing his decision to not build an isolation room that might have reduced puppy deaths from disease,

one shelter operator commented, "I don't want to invest in having more survivors." And some of the non-sheltered groups say they focus solely on middle-class areas, because animals belonging to poorer families have a smaller chance of survival.

In spite of these circumstances, workers believe the animals in their shelters are happy because they are not being hit by cars or poisoned. However, WSPA representatives believe many of the animals would be better off managed on the street under the programs of the municipalities and other animal protection organizations. Unfortunately, relationships between these agencies and WSPA's member societies are frequently tenuous.

I saw the municipal viewpoint when I attended the first-ever animal control conference sponsored by the Health Department of Zoonosis Control. One animal control officer gave a moving presentation about how widely accepted inhumane animal control practices used to be, and focused on positive changes. At the end of the conference, we participated in a ceremony: Each of us was given an unlit candle. The leader then lit her candle and passed the flame on to the candle of the person next to her; this continued until all candles were lit. The message was clear: Each of us has light to give and if we share it, it never goes out.

When WSPA first asked me to speak about shelter management in the U.S.—often considered "the gold standard"—I had no idea what to expect. I walked away with two impressions: One, the animal protection workers of Brazil are proud of what they do, and they should be. They are facing a wide range of difficult situations with what seems to be endless passion, enthusiasm, and kindness.

Secondly, I came to believe that the notion that the U.S. is the sole provider of the gold standard is flawed. There are American shelters experiencing the same struggles, yet Brazil has found some solutions that the U.S. has not. These solutions are not all particularly innovative or elaborate, but the difference is often driven by attitudes: People are humble enough to believe they can improve, and brave enough to ask for help. **AS**



Kim Intino (seated front) and other attendees of the WSPA seminar held in São Paulo, Brazil.