

A Passion for Shelter Work—and for Cats

Animal Sheltering welcomes our new veterinary columnist, Dr. Brenda Griffin

We hate goodbyes, and it was with regret that we recently had to say a fond one to Kate Hurley. Along with Lila Miller of the ASPCA, Hurley has been writing our Shelter Medicine columns for the past few years; these two terrific doctors have helped countless shelters untangle the complicated health challenges of their critters.

This year's series (contained in the first four issues of 2008) on reducing shelter crowding took readers from the big-picture philosophical side of the issue down to the tricky nitty-gritty of how to determine a facility's ideal holding capacity, ensuring that the drive to save lives does not result in an increase in animal stress or suffering. It was an inspiration to read, and provided a vision for care that all organizations should strive to meet.

Hurley has been a longtime contributor to the magazine—she wrote her first piece for us back in 2004—and her passion for and insights into the field have been an inspiration to our readers. And she's not moving to Borneo—she's just cutting back on her crazy schedule! We're hoping she won't be a stranger, and we'll continue to turn to her for her expertise on veterinary issues as they arise.

While goodbyes are always sad, we couldn't be happier to welcome Brenda Griffin to these pages. Griffin is the director of clinical programs for the Maddie's Shelter Medicine Program at Cornell University. Her résumé and achievements make for impressive reading, and her enthusiasm for the field and respect for the work of animal shelters shine brightly. We're excited to have her as a new columnist.

We hope our readers will continue to let us know when there's a veterinary issue they could use help on. As always, the docs are in!

Hello, fellow *Animal Sheltering* readers! I was very excited and honored to be invited to contribute to a magazine I love to read and from which I have learned so much. The editorial staff suggested I introduce myself to you in my first column, and I'm happy to do so.

Firstly, if I were talking instead of writing, you would appreciate my thick Southern accent. I grew up in Columbia, S.C., and this is where my experience with animal shelters began.

I like to laughingly tell people, "Brenda wasn't like the other kids!" because it is really true! While other kids were off playing sports or taking dance lessons and the like, at 12, I started spending my spare time volunteering for our family vet. "Doc" did some work with the local SPCA and a local spay/neuter group as well, and I became a junior member of both organizations (the only junior member, as I recall). Yes, while the soccer moms dropped kids off at the ball field, I was dropped off at SPCA meetings. Folks would ask me, "Where are your parents, kid?" I would tell them I was there on my own accord to help. Indeed, I was quite determined to contribute! I also joined the local dog training club, and the early experiences I had there—combined with those at the Richland County SPCA, the Spay/Neuter Assistance Program, and my family veterinarian—ultimately defined the course I have taken throughout my life and career.

When I was in high school, I got permission from the principal's office to organize and host a spay/neuter education event for the entire school. I went to the municipal shelter and took photos of all the dogs. I even photographed the gas chamber. I invited Leah Lockhart, the president of the spay/neuter group, to give a talk. I am not sure how many of the students who filled the gymnasium that day understood our message; as I recall,



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the slide projector jammed and the microphone system failed and we had to end early, but I think I was hooked from that moment on.

Today, I still try to educate students, but my "kids"—veterinary students here at Cornell—are a bit more receptive than that first captive audience! I am dedicated to passing on knowledge about animal shelters and all aspects of shelter medicine, and my greatest passions—no surprise here—are spay/neuter programs and the awesome importance of not only the physical health of animals, but also *behavioral* health. My early experiences with dog training gave me great appreciation for how important it is to understand animal behavior in order to keep them emotionally healthy and thereby keep them in their homes. I am a big believer in developing and implementing strategies to keep pets with their guardians—and out of animal shelters.

After high school, I attended Clemson University (go Tigers!) as a pre-vet student, double majoring in zoology and psychology, since I wanted to study ani-



Griffin examines a cat during a trip to a New York state shelter.



Griffin monitors an anesthetized puppy during a training session on anesthetic and surgical techniques for spaying and neutering young puppies and kittens.

mal behavior. But my advisers discouraged me: At that time, animal behavior was not recognized or well respected as an important part of veterinary medicine. I eventually transferred to the University of South Carolina, where I graduated with a B.S. in biology and then attended veterinary college at the University of Georgia (go Bulldogs!).

When I graduated in 1990, I was very fortunate to be offered a position as an intern at the Massachusetts SPCA's Angell Memorial Animal Hospital in Boston. My year at the MSPCA was one of the best years of my life. I had worked every summer and every Thanksgiving and Christmas break at "Doc's" small veterinary clinic in my hometown, but never had I seen anything like the incredible animal hospital that was Angell Memorial. I referred to it as a "Walt Disney World of veterinary medicine," and it was actually physically attached to the Boston shelter. What could possibly be better for a new veterinarian?

I loved to go down to the shelter to help out and was very excited to be selected for hire as a part-time shelter vet during my internship year. And for the first time in my life, I saw a shelter where most of the ani-

mals were cats. Being from the Southeast, that was new to me. It was at the MSPCA that I developed a deep respect for the feline species and a new understanding of these amazing creatures. My heart went out to them—there were so many, and they were often so stressed. I wondered how it must feel to see the world through their eyes. I came to appreciate that their stress was under-recognized and that we need to learn more to understand how to meet their housing and enrichment needs in the shelter and veterinary hospital. My love affair with the feline species began.

I cried when my internship was over, but joined a small animal practice across town and continued to volunteer at the Boston shelter on my days off. The shelter staff embraced me and became my best friends—as well as my heroes for the brave work they did day after day. I wrote medical protocols for them and encouraged interns to come over from the hospital to help out in the shelter. I examined, vaccinated, and treated animals, and also assisted with euthanasia. There were more cats than I had ever seen—it was overwhelming, but the staff's caring and courage touched the very core of my soul, and I knew why I had become a veterinar-

ian. I learned so much from my friends there. Carter Luke (now the CEO of the MSPCA-Angell) was a very special mentor to me—he planted seeds in my mind for my future. He told me to use my credentials to do what I really wanted to do. (Thank you, Luke!)

In 1994, I headed back to the Southeast to be closer to family—and began searching for a job as a shelter vet. Indeed, I interviewed at a number of organizations. Veterinary colleagues who knew I was interviewing at shelters and spay/neuter clinics were appalled. They asked, "Is that the only job you can get?" It was as though being a shelter vet was the bottom of the barrel. I was not successful at finding a shelter vet job—I was not ready to perform spay-neuter full-time even though I greatly admired the vets that did—so I ultimately joined another private veterinary practice. But I felt unsettled—I wanted somehow to do more. I decided to apply for advanced training in veterinary medicine and began a residency in small animal internal medicine in 1995. In 1999, I completed my residency at the veterinary college at Auburn University (War Eagle!) and accepted a job as a research fellow there.

Now, as you may have guessed: Brenda was not like the other residents! During the course of residency training, in addition to seeing patients and participating in high-level medical practice, residents are required to conduct research projects designed to improve animal health. My residency committee suggested several different projects, but to no avail—I was not interested in any of them. Finally, they asked me, “What do you want to do?”

Well, I said, I want to solve the pet overpopulation problem. They smiled and said it was a noble goal, but no one was working on that at Auburn. I begged them to let me see if I could convince someone on the faculty to help me, and they agreed. I think I surprised them when I came up with a proposal, identified a new faculty member, Dr. Allen Heath, as a mentor, and received grant funding for my project.

This was my first attempt at studying nonsurgical contraception in cats—the dream of the “spay shot.” The research was promising and very exciting, and when my residency was over, I stayed on as a research fellow because a group of scientists had begun working in this very area! I was ecstatic to be invited to be a part of the research team, and in my new position, I was also able to begin a shelter medicine program. I began with veterinary summer student fellows. The students helped with our research and accompanied me to the local shelter to provide medical support. We also trapped cats on campus for TNR and started a program to provide behavioral enrichment, training, and socialization for dogs and cats awaiting adoption.

I ultimately spent seven years at Auburn University, first as a research fellow, then as an assistant professor participating in contraceptive research and teaching shelter medicine to veterinary and preveterinary students as the programs expanded. Despite having been discouraged and led to believe that shelter medicine and animal behavior were not important aspects of veterinary medicine, I found myself in a position where I was exploring new horizons in veterinary medicine that encompassed both of those passions.

Once again, the caring and courage of the shelter staffs I worked with—from Lee, Chambers, and Elmore counties in Alabama to Muscogee and Troup counties in Georgia—touched the core of my soul. I knew I was doing what I was meant to do: using the credentials I had earned with my advanced training to make a real difference. (Thanks, Luke!) I also worked hard to contribute to a growing body of knowledge about contraception in cats and dogs. Together with Drs. Henry Baker of Auburn and Stephen Boyle of Virginia Tech, I served as a founding core member and lead organizer of the Alliance for Contraception in Cats and Dogs, an organization that continues today under the amazing leadership of Joyce Briggs as the authority for information on exciting, emerging technologies that may help us increase the number of cats and dogs that are sterilized.

Although it wasn't easy to leave the Southeast, where the need for shelter medicine is so great, funding issues made it necessary. I was fortunate to be able to continue as a shelter medicine educator at the veterinary college at Cornell University. In 2006, I joined the faculty as the director of clinical programs for its new Maddie's Shelter Medicine Program.

The heart of the clinical program in shelter medicine at Cornell is our residency training program. I am honored to serve as the primary clinical mentor for two bright, talented, and very compassionate young veterinarians who are studying to become specialists in shelter medicine: Drs. Stephanie Janeczko and Brian DiGangi. As the first two residents in shelter medicine at Cornell, and as residents in a newly emerging specialty, they are true pioneers (well, sometimes more like guinea pigs!).

Being a shelter veterinary specialist is a tremendous challenge. The knowledge and skills required are immense and diverse. Some veterinary colleagues still challenge the notion that specialized knowledge is required to be a shelter veterinarian, but those of us that work in this field recognize the absurdity of this! Shelter medicine is a unique blend, requiring expertise in treatment of indi-

vidual animals and whole populations. The shelter medicine specialist must possess a detailed understanding of infectious disease control and behavioral medicine in the shelter, shelter management, companion animal homelessness, feral cats, animal cruelty, public health protection, and relevant public policy. Shelter medicine specialists must also be well-versed in legal, regulatory, ethical, and emotional aspects of shelter animal care—in addition to having a solid foundation in traditional medical and surgical veterinary disciplines. The field is filled with challenges and rewards. I am so grateful for the opportunity to do what I am doing and for the inspiration that everyone working in animal shelters continues to give me.

During my time at Cornell, I have been able to serve on a national spay/neuter task force convened by the ASPCA and PetSmart Charities, and I've continued to serve on the board of directors of the Association of Shelter Veterinarians. I was delighted to serve as the corresponding author for the publication of the spay/neuter task force's white paper, “The Association of Shelter Veterinarians' veterinary medical care guidelines for spay neuter programs,” published in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* this summer (and summarized in this issue of *Animal Sheltering*!). This groundbreaking document represents a consensus statement from 22 spay/neuter experts on recommended practices geared toward safety, efficiency, and humane quality care for neutering large numbers of cats and dogs.

In the coming issues, I hope to share with you some thoughts on my passions: spay/neuter programs, including those for feral cats, and the awesome importance of total wellness for shelter animals. Total wellness is comprised of both physical and behavioral/emotional health. To me, nothing could be more important! Until next time, keep up your caring and courage—in your work are the circles of compassion that inspire us all, and show us that we're doing what we were meant to do. **AS**