You know the scenario: People walk into your shelter ready to adopt, only to leave angry half an hour later, declaring their intentions to head straight to the pet store. They are the people who just didn't get it, the ones who don't understand what it's really like to work in a shelter, the mean-spirited folks who think they can just come in and pick out any old dog they want because all the animals are "going to be killed" anyway.

Certainly these assessments describe some people all too accurately. But how many others are needlessly turned away? By painting potential adopters with a broad brush and sticking to a strict prescription for the "best" pet guardian, are some shelters turning potential supporters into enemies?

In the following essays, three HSUS staff members consider their experiences with adoptions. One, a former shelter worker, tells what happened when she went from being the person managing the adoption process to the person trying to adopt. (It wasn't pretty.) The second writer explores why it may have happened—and why treating people well is as important as caring about other species. And our program manager for animal sheltering issues explains why the one-size-fits-all adoption policies once recommended by The HSUS no longer work.

Judgment Calls

Talk Back! What do you think? Are shelters too strict and judgmental toward potential adopters—or not strict enough? What does your organization do to help potential adopters through the process of finding the right pets for their families? Have you changed your adoption policies, and if so, why? How do you strike a balance between protecting the animals in your care and trusting community members to help you toward that goal? What are the rewards for your organization? What have been the risks? Email your stories to asm@humanesociety.org.

COLLAGE: BUSSOLATI.COM/JAMIE MITCHELL

PERSPECTIVES: THE ADOPTER

Small Kids? No Dogs Allowed

When this former shelter worker was told no large dogs were appropriate for her young family, she found out how it feels to walk away discouraged and empty-handed—and later learned more than she ever wanted to know about the public's tendencies to lie their way through the process

BY STEPHANIE SHAIN

At the peak of our servitude to all things furry and four-legged, animals outnumbered humans by more than two to one in my household. Cats, dogs, and hamsters kept company with my husband and my two daughters. Ranging in size from 35 to 75 pounds, the dogs in particular had come into our lives like so many of them do—in need of a home that somehow became ours before we'd even had time to think about it.

When we felt we'd reached our limit (possibly stepping over just slightly), my husband and I agreed to a "no replacement" policy for animals who passed on. Due to some behavior issues, dogs had been running our lives and schedules for nearly 15 years, and we planned to take a break in acquiring new family members for a while. Eventual breaches in the agreement included the adoption of two young guinea pig brothers and a very sick kitten. Our determination was already showing signs of weakness.

Pets have short lives, and before we knew it, the youngest of our dogs was 12. Within two difficult years that started late in 2004, we went from being a four-dog family to a one-dog family. Top that off with the deaths of our beloved hamster and two elderly cats during the same period, and we were a household on the edge. For a year we lived this way, animal-deprived, until eventually I decided to push for another exception to add to our much-dwindled menagerie.

I knew just the kind of dog I wanted: a nice male Rottie-shepherd mix, at least three years old. I wasn't going to take the hard-luck case this time. I was not going to pick the dog everyone else passed over. For the first time since I was a kid, I was going to allow myself to go in and pick the "best" dog in the shelter.

I relished the anticipation of adoption. My daughters and I spent hours on local shelter websites. We could have told you at any given time who was where, who had an adoption pending, who had moved into foster care. Bella, the 11-year-old, would read descriptions carefully to Mia, the 2-year-old, and they learned to trust the expertise of those caring for the animals: No matter how cute or sad or perfect a dog looked, they came to understand that we needed to respect a shelter's decision not to adopt an animal to a family with children younger than a certain age. After all, staff were just trying to protect people from harm and animals from poor placements.

> We were a family experienced with big dogs, particularly German shepherds, and we were very experienced in dealing with challenging dogs. Had she given us a few more minutes of her time, she could have learned that. Did she have any idea of the life she was cheating another needy animal out of?

The author's daughter Mia with Panda Bear

Finally, after looking repeatedly at a website profile of an adult female shepherd who didn't seem to be getting any takers, we convinced Dad to give in to the relentless demands of the three girls in his life and at least go take a look.

Once we'd arrived at the nearby shelter, we headed for the dog area. On our walk through the kennels, we noticed kennel cards explaining the safety reasons behind age-restricted adoptions. "No exceptions," the cards read. Because I implicitly trusted staff expertise and appreciated their honesty regarding the kind of home that would be the best match for a dog, the signs didn't faze me.

When we reached the kennel of our coveted shepherd, however, we saw that she, too, had an age restriction. The kennel card noted she could not go to a home with kids under 12, but gave no reason why. The glowing website description had contained no such caveat.

A staff person happened by, and I tried to sort out the confusion: Had something happened? Had staff noticed a change in her disposition? Had there been a mistake on the dog's cage card, or was the website incorrect? Though the site had listed age restrictions for other dogs, this one had been restriction-free, I explained.

"I don't know," the employee responded. "I don't do the website."

Surprised by her indifference, I wondered if she really considered that to be an appropriate answer. But, remembering my own long days as a shelter employee, I tried to make allowances for the frustration caused by endless and often pointless-seeming questions from the public. I practiced my respectful voice.

"Um, OK, could you tell me about her?" I pressed on. "I understand the need for age restrictions but was wondering if perhaps something had changed."

Her response, delivered matter-of-factly, dropped like a lead balloon: "Big dogs can't live with little kids."

I told myself to take a deep breath and remain calm. I saw my husband's reaction and thought I was going to have to stuff my purse in his mouth. I remembered again that before I came to work for The HSUS, I had walked a mile in this woman's shoes, and I know how hard her job can be.

"OK," I asked, "are there dogs here you could point me to that might be good for a family with kids?"

"No."

"You don't have any dogs here for a family with small kids?"

"No. Dogs of that size go fast."

Was I dreaming? Was this a joke? Had I entered a time warp of the sheltering world? So many of us at the local and national levels have worked so hard for so many years to persuade landlords and others that size doesn't matter, but now I was being rejected before I'd even applied to adopt—and a dog was losing her chance at a new home—because a shelter was telling me it *does* matter?

We left. My kids were sad. I was sad. My husband was mad. In a split second, I realized how so many people must feel when they are denied an adoption.

On the drive home, my husband, who works on animal welfare issues unrelated to dogs and cats, came to the conclusion every shelter worker has learned to loathe: "They'd rather kill that dog than give her to us because we have a kid?!"

I nearly passed out at the sound of my own husband uttering the words that used to make my hair stand on end. But then again, in a second, there it was. He was right; that was what it felt like. The employee we'd just spoken with hadn't given us even three minutes of her time; she'd already told us our home wasn't suitable for any of the dogs in that shelter because I was holding a small person.

We were a family experienced with big dogs, particularly German shepherds, and we were very experienced in dealing with challenging dogs. Had she given us a few more minutes of her time, she could have learned that. Did she have any idea of the life she was cheating another needy animal out of?

Back home I did what I think many families would have done: I headed straight for the classifieds. It was merely an exercise, not a plan to actually get a dog from the newspaper. Not surprisingly, nearly a dozen ads touted German shepherd puppies and shepherd mixes at prices ranging from $200 to $600. A few ads noted they would hold the pups for Christmas, now just a couple of weeks away. As a member of a loving family committed to their animals, I can only imagine the reception I would have received from one of these puppy sellers. I could practically feel the love oozing from the newspaper.

In relaying the story of my shelter experience to friends, coworkers, and family members over the next several weeks, I was surprised and heartbroken by the nature of the responses. Multiple childless friends offered to adopt the dog and give her to us. Others suggested lying about the kids. Many who had adopted dogs said that "of course" they had lied about the details of their lives during the process. Make no mistake: These are good, committed pet owners. These are the kind of people you pray will come into your shelter or reach out to your rescue group. They are people who truly see their animals as family members. And when I showed my naiveté and shock at their suggestions, they laughed, unable to understand why I'd give a second thought to circumventing rules they thought were just plain stupid.

We didn't give up, at last finding a warm and welcoming reception at our local animal control agency in Washington, D.C. The building wasn't nearly as nice as the first shelter we'd visited, and it was in a rougher corner of town. But it's the kind of place that makes you forget its physical circumstances the moment you walk in. The employees were actually happy to see us. They were happy to answer questions about the dogs we looked at. One staff member sat down and spent at least 15 minutes talking to me about a dog who'd caught my eye but who had an age restric-

tion. And while I wasn't asking for an exception, the employee believed it important to explain the shelter's decision to me.

(I should probably note here that at no time in any shelter did I ever mention that I worked for The HSUS or that I had ever worked in a shelter. I wanted the full-on "real" and "regular person" adoption experience.)

On February 13, we did end up adopting a dog. And of course, he was the one no one else wanted. A gorgeous animal who just didn't "show" well, he'd been in the shelter for weeks. He was too disinterested in the constant stream of visitors drawn by his striking looks and the cute name he had been given: Panda.

We had hit the jackpot. The 68-pound Panda Bear is truly the perfect dog. And although we had long donated to the agency that had cared for him, the positive experience intensified our support. I can enthusiastically encourage others to visit that shelter because I know they will be treated well.

Maybe the person at the first shelter was not representative of the rest of the staff. Maybe she was having a bad day. But does it matter? As the old adage goes, you only have one chance to make a first impression. She blew it. And had we really been a "regular" family, she might have blown it for us for good, sending us out into the world to tell our family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers about how awful they were at the shelter, about how the shelter person herself told us she had no dogs for families.

While my hope is that we can all remember, even at the end of a really hard day, that being nice goes a long way, I do have another hope as well: that we can take another look at outdated policies that turn away good, responsible people or encourage them to lie to get a dog. If so many people do it, how effective are we? Perhaps we should consider shortening that list of "absolutes" to only the things that really matter. Poor policies that encourage lying do not protect animals. They teach the public that our expectations are too high, even silly in some cases. I know quite a few dogs who love their leash walks and time at the dog park—and whose adoption paperwork says they have a fenced-in yard.

Stephanie Shain is the director of outreach for the Companion Animals section of The Humane Society of the United States.

PERSPECTIVES: THE ADOPTION COUNSELOR

Taming the Beast Within

Sometimes the human animal is the hardest to deal with. But it's critical to remain calm and treat people with the same respect you offer to the other creatures who come through your doors

BY MICHELLE RILEY

An adoption counselor's worst nightmare is to hear someone say: "Forget it. I'll just go buy a puppy." You get that sinking feeling that your tireless efforts are never enough—and that no matter how hard you try, you still won't reach everyone. You go home believing you've failed and contributed to the death of one more homeless animal by causing the needless purchase of one more puppy-mill puppy. You toss and turn all night, thinking you've lost a potentially good adopter who will probably never walk back into a shelter again. You might as well go to the pet store yourself.

What caused this chain reaction? It could be a number of things. Maybe the person trying to adopt didn't want to show you his lease because it clearly states he can't have pets. Maybe he didn't want to give you the contact information for his veterinarian because his dog of five years has never even been to the vet. Maybe he didn't want to give you his previous address because he was issued a citation for animal abuse while living there. Or maybe … it was you.

An adoption counselor's job is beset by long hours, hard work, and little money. When I was one, I think I spent more hours with the dogs at the shelter than I did with my own two dogs at home. Sometimes you're surrounded by unpleasant things: animals being surrendered, animals getting sick, animals being euthanized. Once a coworker and I took in a corgi whose owner was moving. I watched her fill out paperwork in the lobby while her dog shivered next to her, wondering what they were doing there. When it was time for me to take him back to the kennels, the dog hit the floor and wouldn't move. His owner had to get up, walk with us to the kennel door, and trick him into thinking she was coming with him. She didn't say goodbye, nor did she shed a single tear. To this day, thinking about that little guy—both his abandonment and his later departure with his new family—brings tears to my eyes.

During my interview for the job, the director of behavior and I discussed euthanasia. What she said has always stuck with me. Her words went something like this: "You have to look at the big picture. All it takes is for one person to have a bad experience with a shelter

dog, and it could turn them off from adopting forever. They tell their friends, and they tell their friends, and they tell their friends, and pretty soon one negative experience has ended up affecting several handfuls of people and potentially turning them all off. This massively works against our mission. When I have to make the hard decision to euthanize an aggressive dog, I'm doing it because I don't want that dog biting someone and in turn working against the mission that we are all trying to accomplish by being in this field."

I came to realize during my time in adoptions that this sentiment holds true for just about every aspect of animal sheltering, not just euthanasia or decisions regarding aggressive dogs. All it takes for someone to walk out the door and never come back is one nasty encounter, one condescending remark, one tired or frustrated look. And it can happen so easily. If someone had come up to me moments after I put my little corgi friend in the kennel and started asking a bunch of questions about this dog or that dog, I probably would not have been my most pleasant self. In fact, it probably would have been a pretty cold encounter. I was so disgusted with humankind at that moment, I would have lumped them all together—relinquishers, adopters, and anyone else who dared speak to me.

But we can't do that. We have to be able to deal with all people in a thoughtful and respectful way, just as we treat the animals in our care. We in the animal welfare community can't be effective by talking out of both sides of our mouths, shouting "ADOPT!" at the top of our lungs before proceeding to scare people away.

I'm not suggesting that we lower our standards simply because we don't want people to go out and buy puppies. That doesn't solve the problem either. If you work in a shelter that has a policy against invisible fences, you should continue to uphold that policy. If you feel that an adopter isn't the right match for a particular dog, by all means, say no. You are there to protect the animals first and foremost.

If the woman who'd surrendered the corgi had returned a week later asking for her dog back, I would have told her no. Knowing that she was probably just going to go buy another dog if I didn't give him to her, I still would have held my ground. After watching the way she surrendered him and hearing her say that she'd "just get another dog" when she moved into a place that allowed pets, I wouldn't want that on my conscience. Returning an animal to such an uncertain fate would have left me haunted: Every day I would have thought about what she was going to do the next time it wasn't convenient for her to have a dog. Next time she might just open up the front door and let him run. And who would be responsible for that? I would.

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Michelle Riley with Peaches and Pugsly

Turning someone away because she's not ready or fit to adopt is an entirely different matter than turning someone off with something you do or say. We should not be driving good adopters away with bad attitudes.

If you're sour because you just had to deal with some jerk who keeps his dog tied up outside all day in 90-degree weather, or if you're upset because your favorite 10-year-old Chihuahua had to be euthanized, take a break from the floor. Don't let it dampen the chances of more animals who still have a chance of going to a new home.

Think back to your last restaurant experience. Did you deal with nice waiters who smiled and took the time to answer your questions? Or did you deal with someone who seemed irritated by your presence and unwilling to explain anything? And if you did deal with the latter, what did you do about it? You left, right?

Of course you did. Or, at the very least, you ate your food and never came back. If someone at a restaurant is rude to you, though, nobody dies because of it. But if you are rude to someone at the shelter and they leave, somebody might. The person you upset just may have been interested in the 4-year-old cat who's been at your shelter for three months. She just may have 20 years of experience dealing with exuberant bully breeds and could be perfect for the 7-year-old boxer no one has given a second glance.

Even when we're overworked, tired, and sick of living from paycheck to paycheck, we need to be as helpful as we can be. The animals are counting on us.

Michelle Riley became Animal Sheltering*'s first circulation and marketing manager last May.*

PERSPECTIVES: THE BALANCE

Walking the Line

In the best-case scenarios, adoption decisions lead animals to wonderful new homes. In the worst, they cause great suffering. Figuring out the difference—before it's too late—presents an emotional minefield for many shelter workers

BY CORY SMITH

Holding the fates of 13,000 animals in your hands is a daunting responsibility, but that's what my colleagues and I did every year at the shelter I worked for before coming to The HSUS. Some of the animals spent weeks with us, while others passed through in an instant. Where are they now? It's a question I spend many nights asking myself. Ensuring the quality of life for so many vulnerable, soulful creatures was both a privilege and a burden, one that resonates even three years after my departure. I like to think that, despite our mistakes, we made the best decisions possible for the majority of animals in our care.

As the field services supervisor and a member of the shelter management team, I helped with adoption decisions and disputes, conducted home visits, processed animals going to new families, and of course, paid close attention to the animals my staff rescued. I was also a euthanasia technician, and I cannot deny the joy I experienced when animals left the building for a second chance at life. I'll never forget the time a young woman squealed with excitement and did a little dance as we handed her the carrier holding her newly adopted orange tiger kitten. Or the time a young single guy, watching the hyperactive shepherd mix he had chosen to adopt try to leap across the counter, surprised us all by assuming the intimate role of interpreter that most of us take on after years of living with our pets: "He's just trying to get from point A to point B as quickly as possible!" he explained.

I remember those adoptions as examples of the strong human-animal bond, and I allow myself the satisfaction of knowing that those animals are truly loved.

But anyone who has seen an adoption go bad—resulting in the return of a dog or cat to the shelter or, much worse, a cruelty case—understands the dark side of our tremendous responsibility to the animals in our care. When the adoptions specialist at my old shelter decided to place a cocker spaniel with a slightly odd man in the neighborhood, we all supported that decision. We knew the man was not in the best financial circumstances, but he walked to the shelter every day to visit the dog and seemed genuinely interested in a companion. It was disheartening, to say the least, when a humane officer discovered that the dog was being kept tied up in the home. Despite attempts to educate him, we were unable to persuade the man to change his ways, so we removed the dog, severed the adoption agreement, and found a better home with a nice older couple who adored their new friend.

That was a humbling experience, as was the time shelter workers in a neighboring county called to report they'd just impounded one of our adopted rottweilers, now emaciated and tied in a closet with electrical cord.

Though these types of adoption-turned-horror stories were few and far between, it took only one to remind us that, despite our best efforts to screen for good homes, nothing is foolproof—and sometimes we end up placing cats and dogs with people who don't properly care for them.

Selecting new homes for animals carries the same weight of responsibility as other life-altering choices—including the decision to euthanize or the decision to return an animal to someone who has relinquished him, allowed him to roam, or treated him in a way that led to his seizure by a humane agency. Each animal who walks out of a shelter enters a huge, crazy, complicated world where anything can happen. Allowing strangers to take an animal home simply because they've said all the right things or look good on paper presents deep emotional conflicts. It's a necessary risk—but also one that can lead to great suffering if done haphazardly or without follow-up.

The urge to control animals' fates is understandable given all the suffering shelter workers witness, but ultimately we can't dictate human behavior; a signature on an adoption contract that stipulates an indoor existence for a cat or daily exercise for a dog is no guarantee that that animal will have a good life. Remaining professional and open-minded in the face of such uncertainty and potential cruelty can seem like a tall order. Many in the sheltering field become accustomed to harbor-

Selecting new homes for animals carries the same weight of responsibility as other life-altering choices—including the decision to euthanize or the decision to return an animal to someone who has relinquished him, allowed him to roam, or treated him in a way that led to his seizure by a humane agency. Each animal who walks out of a shelter enters a huge, crazy, complicated world where anything can happen.

Cory Smith

ing low expectations of pet owners—if only to protect themselves from routine disappointment.

But the animals awaiting new homes depend on the ability of adoption staff, cruelty investigators, and others to challenge ourselves and keep our emotions in check. And even though sheltering professionals often experience intense pain and despair, we now have a clearer understanding of the causes of compassion fatigue—and we possess more tools to help us navigate the emotional minefields that often make it difficult for us to see the big picture and work effectively with the public.

We are also lucky to have assessment systems that can help us diagnose problems within our organizational structures, retention strategies that address employees' emotional needs, and public outreach campaigns designed to address the issue of pet overpopulation at its core. We have made incredible advancements in improving sheltering methods, educating the public, and protecting animals through legal means. Adoption programs, too, have greatly benefited from the knowledge of marketing and customer service experts in other fields.

Along with this professionalization has come a broader acceptance of more nuanced adoption policies that seek to assess individual situations rather than impose a rigid set of requirements that each adopter must meet. Since there are no "national" adoption standards, The HSUS used to provide a set of guidelines to shelters seeking assistance in setting policy. Drafted in the mid-'90s, these recommendations reflected the position of the majority of the shelters at the time—definitively stating, for instance, that no dog should be placed with an adopter lacking a fenced yard.

Times have changed, and many adoption counselors don't focus on fences at all anymore—or on many of the other characteristics that once seemed so central to the definition of a "good pet owner." Because animal populations, animal shelter resources, local laws, and pet ownership trends vary, it's impossible to offer universal adoption policy recommendations. Some organizations, in deference to local culture and to regional preferences, may feel comfortable placing huskies and other northern breeds as "working dogs." Others are okay with placing sterilized cats as "barn cats." Many shelters have lifted moratoriums on adoption of black cats at Halloween and puppies and kittens at Christmas.

The one-size-fits-all approach toward adoptions is no longer valid. Instead, The HSUS generally advises shelters to routinely evaluate which policies are most effective for the animals, the organization, and the community. Some suggestions include conducting consistent follow-ups and comprehensive training for adoption staff and volunteers.

There is a big difference between safeguarding against the placement of child-unfriendly dogs in homes with children and telling the public that "big dogs can't live with little kids." Certainly, some people will never be—and should never be—candidates for adopting an animal from your facility. And we would never suggest that any shelter stretch the boundaries of its comfort zone by placing animals solely for the purposes of getting them out the door or raising adoption figures. In the end, there will always be a fine line between finding homes and ensuring a good quality of life for our animals.

"The purpose of your animal shelter's adoption program," wrote HSUS staff in those old guidelines, "should be to find responsible, lifelong homes for animals who are suitable family companions."

To this, we still hold true.

Cory Smith is the program manager of animal sheltering issues for The Humane Society of the United States.