

Volunteer at an Animal Shelter

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It's a dark and rainy night. A black car pulls up and stops in the middle of an alley. Suspicious figures emerge with a wiggling burlap sack. They drop the sack in a dark corner of the alley and walk away. The sound of pitiful meowing can be heard as the car pulls away into the night. When morning comes a family is walking by the alley and hears strange sounds. They go to investigate and find four water-soaked baby kittens. The children beg to keep them but the dad has allergies so they all head to the nearest animal shelter. There, a kind person takes the kittens in and gives them a warm bed, food, and water. Throughout the following weeks many people come through to look for the perfect pet. Soon all of the kittens are adopted and sent home with new families.

Animal dumping does occur and for various reasons like starting a family, moving, sickness, or finances. The animal could also have behavior issues that their owners don't want to spend time correcting. Strays and run-aways also find themselves being taken off the streets so that they don't get hurt. For these reasons, quite a few animals have made their home at the Aurora Adopt-A-Pet and many other animal shelters. These shelters are used as a way of temporarily housing homeless animals until they get adopted and go to a new home. All of the animals need people to watch over them and provide them with food, water, and love. So who is there to do this but us? I remember a day when I went to the Aurora shelter to clean and I found a small box sitting outside of the door. The box contained a large cat. The cat had been dumped and it needed to be cared for so I took it inside and gave it food and water. With shelter volunteers' help it was able to find a new home. Helping animals like this one find homes is a great way to spend your time.

Volunteering at a local animal shelter is a fun and rewarding experience. The animals love you and want you to stay all day and play with them. Laura Solkey, an Aurora Adopt-A-Pet volunteer, (personal communication, November 4, 2011) said that one of her favorite memories is “playing with the dogs in the grass enclosure.” She remembers one time when “Buster ran up and sat down (on my foot!) for a chest rub. So adorable. I will never forget the love the dogs and cats would give to me while I was there” (2011). Being a volunteer means that you can take care of and play with dogs and cats even if for some reason you can’t have your own. The rewards you receive would be the unspoken gratitude of the animals and joy when they find a “forever home.” Kae Russell, 4-H program manager and ex-shelter volunteer, (personal communication, November 15, 2011) said, “the animals make your day because they’re always happy to see you.”

Being a part of something greater than yourself is a wonderful feeling. It provides you with an opportunity to learn valuable life lessons while working with animals. By volunteering, a person becomes more responsible and trustworthy. They are then well-rounded and get more out of life. Betty Vanluchene, (personal communication, November 4, 2011) a volunteer who played a big part in setting up the shelter in Aurora talks about how volunteering has impacted her life. “I love volunteering,” she says. “I believe it makes you a stronger person...your values are higher and you feel better about yourself because you are doing something that makes you a happier individual.” Haley VanDeWalle, (personal communication, November 15, 2011) a sophomore at AHS and a shelter volunteer said: “I find that I can let go of attachments better. Working at an animal shelter has definitely influenced my future.”

Becoming a volunteer at an animal shelter will help you become a more sympathetic and caring individual. Maggie Rasmussen, the AHS Guidance Counselor (personal communication, November, 9 2011) says:

What is different about volunteering with animals is what is gained through the animal. Picking up trash at a park is being a good citizen. Animals teach us patience, compassion, love, gentleness, they fill our hearts--they are so important and helpful to our mental well-being.

Animals are our companions and help us through the tough times in life. They stand beside us when we are scared and comfort us whenever they can. When we need them, they are there. They lick our faces and hands, they rub against our legs, they sing us songs, they curl up on our laps and shoulders, and they nudge us with their heads. Animals are with us through laughter and tears. That is their job.

When around so many cute animals all the time, volunteers face a problem. The problem they face at an animal shelter is that when they are around all of those loving, homeless animals...well...they want to take them home. Most of the time shelter volunteers can escape that conclusion but sometimes it is just fate. Something similar happened to Cathy Smith, a volunteer at Aurora Adopt-A-Pet, (personal communication, November 4, 2011). She said:

A very serious looking dog with a penetrating gaze was in quarantine for a few weeks. Over that period of time, I noticed he ate less and less. He was still very healthy, but was beginning to not flourish. I began to sit in his kennel with him and encourage him to eat. While I was out mowing my lawn one Sunday in November, 2010, I looked up and it appeared that dog was standing in front of my house. Weird... long story short, the quarantine dog had gotten away from his walker and WAS standing right in front of my

home. I returned him to the shelter, but couldn't stop thinking of him over the next month or so. Yeah, you know the rest of this story.... his name is Dwight and I adopted him on December 8, 2010. He is not quite as serious looking anymore, and I've even caught him smiling and laughing at times now.

I myself had to deal with wanting to bring home some of the animals that came in. When I first saw the two “dingo dogs” come in I loved them both. They weren't really Dingo's but rather German Shepherd/Husky mixes. One had light blue eyes and the other had one brown and one blue eye. I loved them both while they were there and they ended up going to good homes. Either way it is a happy ending...or beginning for both parties, being a volunteer and going the extra mile makes sad animal cases, like these, become happy endings.

Not only does a volunteer have an impact on animals at the shelter but through those animals, volunteers also affect people. Many people, whether they live near an animal shelter or far away will see the animals that the shelters have for adoption online or in newspapers. They will then visit and play with the animal they hope to adopt and then fill out an application. Upon adopting a new pet they are excited and joyful because of their family's new addition and thankful for all who made it possible. I asked several members in the community if they had adopted a pet and one was Elizabeth Cox, a senior at Aurora High School (AHS). When asked if she had ever adopted a pet Cox (personal communication, November 11, 2011) said, “Yes. My family adopted a Jack Russell named Sharpay from there, and WE LOVE HER!” I personally remember Sharpay when she was in the Aurora shelter and was excited to find out that the Cox family was going to adopt her. Many people adopt pets from animal shelters and love them. Animals change lives for the better, and having people to be with, makes the animal's job twice as fun and effective.

I have been volunteering since 2006 at the Aurora Adopt-A-Pet and it has had a big impact on my life. Every Tuesday after school I go to help out with the cats and dogs. I clean their pens and give them much needed attention. I love animals and love spending time with them each week at the shelter. Being around groups of dogs and cats has helped me gain knowledge of how to handle certain situations and how to act around the animals too. Volunteering there has helped me to realize what I want for my future. After high school I plan on going to college for animal science so that I can work with dogs and other animals. I want to be able to find a job training dogs for assistance and special needs' people.

There are other activities besides cleaning pens that a volunteer can do. For example, some shelters have dog walkers that mainly come to walk the dogs. Nancy Furse (personal communication, November 8, 2011) and her husband are dog walkers at the Aurora Adopt-A-Pet. When asked what made them decide to volunteer she answered, "We like dogs and [sic] job of walking dogs fits our lifestyle. (We walk alot [sic] for exercise.)" Not only do they help with keeping the animals well exercised, they are also keeping themselves fit in the process. All of the volunteers can take turns walking dogs and caring for the other animals. If you can't keep up with the physical labor or just can't take time out of your busy schedule, you could always volunteer your money to purchase supplies. Donations are always needed at shelters whether they are paper products, towels, or checks. Activities and needs vary depending on what type of animal shelter you are at and what types of animals there are at that particular place.

Not all animal shelters just have dogs and cats. Some have rabbits, birds, and other creatures. If you don't necessarily want to work with dogs and cats, find a shelter with more variety. Russell said, "I went to Grand Island's animal shelter once. It had dogs, cats, rabbits,

and I think there was even a ferret” (2011). There are all kinds of different animals at shelters if you look hard enough. Each one needs love and attention.

The question being asked now is “should I volunteer?” That will have to be something you decide for yourself. Although volunteering at a shelter is a great way to get involved and become well-rounded, it is not for everyone. Judy Hitzemann, (personal communication, November 6, 2011) Aurora Adopt-A-Pet president had this to say when asked about encouraging or discouraging people who want to volunteer:

I most definitely would do both. I encourage people who need to feel needed, who like/love cats/dogs, who can commit, who can come as a family or Mom or Dad [sic] bring in a child to work with them. It's a great way to spend time together and help a cause. It's a great way to meet amazing people and some who make you just scratch your head and say ‘huh’? I would discourage anyone who thinks it is an ‘easy’ job, who can't commit, and who won't give it the time needed to fulfill duties on a shift. OR who doesn't like cats and dogs. Also, I would discourage anyone who can't accept the work of other volunteers.

Nevertheless, if you want to volunteer there are always opportunities just around the corner. Not all volunteering has to involve animals. Many people do community service that has nothing to do with animals. You never know when an opportunity to help your community will come to you. A lot of shelter volunteers start out coming to the nearest animal shelter because of a lost pet or looking to adopt. I asked several people why they started volunteering and one of the responses was from Karen Kliewer, an Aurora Adopt-A-Pet volunteer, (personal communication, November 4, 2011). Kliewer said:

My little dog Murphy disappeared one night and I never saw him again. I think maybe a coyote got him, but [sic] called to see if anyone had seen him in Aurora. In talking to Judy, she asked if I would be interested in volunteering at the shelter. And since I love animals so much, thought that would be a good idea.

Another response came from Susan Deininger, an Aurora Adopt-A-Pet volunteer (personal communication, November 3, 2011). She said that “we couldn't find our cat and went there looking for him.” People like this are animal lovers who have found an excellent way to be a part of their community. The cost for volunteering is time and you receive adequate reward for all of your hard work and dedication from both animals and people.

If you are an animal lover, what better way to help out in the community than by volunteering at the local animal shelter? You help other people, you help animals, and you help yourself. Like the quote at the Aurora shelter says, “to the world you may be just one person, but to an adopted pet you are the world.” Be a part of the change this world needs, volunteer at an animal shelter. Help save lives. Animals need you and you need them.



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