

Searching for a Second Chance

Written by Alena Hall
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With the fierce intelligence of a Rottweiler and the herding instincts of an Australian Cattle Dog, Shya believes she is the true leader of our pack.

While I tether her sturdy body to mine as we set out for an afternoon stroll, she doesn't seem to mind. She knows that the neighborhood adventure was, in fact, her idea. Trotting politely alongside me with a panting smile and metronomic tale, she amuses my false perception of dominance as she restrains her desire to bound forward into the unknown and explore the world around her. After all, she understands that the one in charge must still retain a sense of control.

When the clock strikes 6 p.m. each day, Shya attempts to contribute to the preparation of our family dinner in her own unique, unconventional way. Dragging each toy out of her wicker basket and splaying them across the living room carpet, she selects her tattered and decapitated stuffed goose for the menu's main course. She tosses the goose into the air, her focused chocolate eyes and agile paws ready to pounce once it returns to the ground. She doesn't think to share with the rest of us, but we pay no mind. Only the leader of the pack earns the privilege of enjoying a goose dinner every night.

Before turning in for the evening, Shya's alpha behavior makes one final appearance. Ambling into the family room where I lay dozing on the sofa, she nudges me awake with her cold, wet nose without hesitation. Ever so gently, she places her mouth around my wrist to maneuver my hand onto her silky, rich brown coat, begging to feel my affection.

She soon receives what she seeks, the touch of her security blanket, of her rescuer, reminiscent of approximately three years ago as she watched the animal shelter disappear from her view in the passenger seat.

As I remember our fortune of finding one another, I cannot help but wonder how often other animals in her former situation come across such luck. Some are homeless from birth and discovered under the front porch of local residents' homes. Others are abandoned by owners who cannot afford pet care in the struggling economy. Regardless, the Orange County Animal Services Center does not discriminate in addressing the reasons why these animals need a new home—they simply aim to provide one. From puppies to piglets, the shelter personnel care for a wide array of animals, keeping them healthy and happy until their adoption papers are signed. Lucky for these animals, they find temporary solace in a shelter with one of the highest adoption rates in the area.

An open-door shelter that provides transitory housing for stray and homeless animals, Orange County Animal Services Center is responsible for all animal control and animal sheltering activities within Orange County. They provide pet adoption, foster care, vaccination and volunteer opportunities to the surrounding community as well as educate residents on the importance of proper pet care. The shelter's collaborative relocation with Orange County Animal Control and their administrative team to their new, state-of-the-art facility in June 2009 significantly improved the animal's living conditions and opportunities for finding permanent homes.

"The old facility was basically set back on a dirt road— it was pretty secluded and the surrounding area was simply dead grass and dirt," said Ashley Russo, UNC-Chapel Hill's Helping Paws of the Campus Y President. The cramped kennel quarters and lack of

landscaping hindered the dogs from enjoying suggested amounts of daily exercise. The heavy aroma of wet dog overwhelmed each room, and the facility's overall design matched its musty odor. Needless to say, few perceived the shelter as an inviting place to spend a Saturday afternoon.

The new facility on Eubanks Road tends to evoke quite the opposite reaction. Casey Clements, a shelter volunteer, attributes the shelter's main improvements over the past few years to the general increase in square footage. The shelter now manages larger adoption rooms for both dogs and cats with new hygienic plumbing systems that keep the areas looking and smelling clean. The tidy appearance of the new facility attracts more community members than ever before and inspires a more enjoyable volunteering and adopting experience. The perimeter of the building is equipped with extensive walking trails, providing dogs with the outdoor exposure they crave. The facility's size enables them to house other animals such as rabbits, ducks, lizards and goats, former shelter public relations intern Perri Kylow said.

The new facility presents further opportunities for expansion, especially with the interactive cat cuddling room. "Recent studies have shown that cats are more likely to go cabin crazy in their kennels than dogs, so the shelter is focusing a lot more of their attention on keeping the cats socialized," Clements said. As the cats spend more time in the kennels and socialize less with others, their chances of adoption decrease substantially. As the staff updates the cat room to feature a more interactive design, volunteers spend an increased amount of time socializing the cats to combat this issue.

The cats are not the only animals reaping the benefits of the recent move, however. The dogs enjoy a substantially larger adoption room with kennels made of glass doors as

opposed to uninviting wire fencing. Dogs require significantly more exercise than cats, so the walking trails in the periphery of the building are proving extremely useful. “It is really important to give the dogs as much walking time outside as possible because they spend so much of their days indoors,” said Allison Hargett, UNC-CH Helping Paws outreach coordinator. The shelter’s extensive and active network of volunteers also ensures that the dogs receive as much attention and socialization as possible.

Due to its increased space and welcoming appearance, the shelter “now hosts more events than ever before,” Kylow said. From Pet Spa Day to community outreach Saturdays, the shelter draws attention to its animals eligible for adoption as well as the overall importance of proper pet care throughout the community. Thirty other rescue operations in the area work closely with the shelter to disseminate their message as well as provide care for animals rescued in Orange County. “When they have space in their rescue, they come to the shelter and take as many animals as they can care for to make room for more adoptable animals,” Hargett said.

The new facility, volunteer network and community outreach efforts all bode well for the animals temporarily residing in the shelter. “You would be surprised by the number of adoptions that occur,” Clements said. The dogs in particular experience a high turnover (adoption) rate. “I don’t think I have ever been in the shelter and seen the same dog from one week to the next, often times from one day to the next,” Hargett said.

Despite all of its facility improvements and success stories, the shelter remains a euthanasia-practicing shelter. However, Kylow said euthanasia rates have decreased substantially since their move to the new shelter. “People think that kill shelters are constant euthanasia factories, but they really aren’t,” Clements said. The shelter only

euthanizes animals suffering from severe physical and behavioral illnesses. “It is never based on the amount of time a dog or cat has spent in the shelter without the prospect of adoption,” Hargett said.

Overall, the shelter staff and volunteers transitioned smoothly into life at the new facility and anticipate only good things to come. “This shelter is better than any other place I’ve volunteered,” Hargett said. “It is a great facility and things are improving constantly. Every time I go in to volunteer, older animals have been adopted and replaced by new ones looking for good homes.”

With more than 70 volunteers donating their time each week to help care for the animals and community members donating resources in high demand, the animals receive the loving care and attention they deserve until their adopters walk through the shelter doors. Luckily, it is only a matter of days until they meet their rescuers. Soon each animal will enjoy a life similar to Shya’s: exploring new territories, helping prepare nightly meals, and feeling the soothing touch of their companion as they drift off to sleep.