

PAWS for Action – In the Name of Mercy
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Often referred to as the “father” of the no-kill movement, Ed Duvin wrote groundbreaking articles challenging the “business as usual” mentality of the animal welfare movement in the 1980s and 1990s.

As a relative newcomer to the field I find the pace of change far too sluggish. After all, animals are dying every day in shelters. In fact, shelter euthanasia is the leading cause of death in companion animals in the U.S.

It helps me to hear from animal welfare “old-timers” who know the difference between 1980 and 2015. I call on them when I feel especially discouraged and they give me the perspective to see that we have, indeed, come a long way.

Ed Sayers, former President and CEO of the ASPCA, remembers reading Duvin’s pivotal article entitled, “In the Name of Mercy,” when it was first published in 1989. Duvin was critical of shelter management and boards of directors, finding them too easily defeated by the overwhelming number of incoming animals. In their defeat they somehow learned to live with the high death toll.

Initially stunned, Sayers began to consider the possibility that Duvin may have a point. He realized that many who wore the battle scars from years in animal welfare may have become jaded. In order to cope with the day-to-day reality they drank the kool-aid and blamed high euthanasia rates on an ignorant public.

Duvin characterized the shelter community as a “slumbering giant,” consumed by its passion yet failing in the pursuit of excellence on behalf of animals. He spoke to the lack of accountability in nonprofit animal welfare organizations.

Duvin saw the lack of a reliable national data base as a root issue in the ambivalence toward raising the bar in local animal welfare organizations. Effective program development and assessment is not possible without good historical data to compare results. During my first year in animal welfare this data was astonishingly hard to find and what I did find was spotty to say the least.

Duvin notes that shelter budgets too often do not include meaningful allocations for outreach and education, which is essential to getting us off this hamster wheel of high birth and euthanasia rates. You have to plant trees if you want to have shade. Yet in a culture of “we want it now” the foresight needed to allocate scarce resources to the future is lacking .

Talented and well trained volunteers are the key, Duvin says, to effective outreach programs. Preferably volunteers will come from the target neighborhoods to help our organizations gain the trust necessary to serve those populations most in need.

Last but not least, Duvin talks about the importance of reaching veterinarians and pet food manufacturers to aid our education efforts. He blasts pet food companies for romanticizing puppies and kittens. He tells shelter leaders to actively promote those veterinarians who go beyond nominal participation in low cost spay/neuter services and agree to educate their clients “about the staggering dimensions of companion animal overpopulation.”

We have come a long way but there is so much more to do. Only when animal welfare organizations refuse to be lured by municipal funds to become the local “dog pound” we will really be getting somewhere. The government money is never sufficient for the level of care needed to support high live release rates. These organizations pay dearly for the privilege of euthanizing the same animals they purport to help and donors unwittingly fill in the gaps, enabling a broken system to continue.

One by one animal welfare leaders are standing up to the status quo and when they can muster up enough courage and hope in the possibility of better outcomes they invent creative, out of the box solutions to age old problems. This is the good fight for those willing to take the risk.

Bobbi Yeo lives in Opelika, AL. She is the CEO of PAWS Humane in Columbus, GA, an animal shelter and veterinary clinic offering low-cost spay/neuter and other services to the public. Email her at bbyeo@pawshumane.org with your comments and story ideas.