

## **Sunday Column – The Animal Welfare Movement**

### **To run 6.5.16**

Some 27 years ago an animal welfare activist named Ed Duvin wrote an article entitled “In the Name of Mercy”. In those days, shelter workers felt they were doing the best they could even with euthanasia rates in the 80% – 90% range. The word “euthanasia” means good death and was considered an act of mercy for animals that were likely to languish in dank shelters with little to enrich their lives.

Ed Duvin believed this was an easy out and that we could, in fact, do better than this for the animals we claimed to care for. He challenged boards of directors and shelter workers to, “hold themselves accountable for meeting demanding performance standards that preserve life---not destroy it.”

Duvin’s ideas were revolutionary and began a wave of new thinking that continues to this day. It also created tension between various groups spanning a range of philosophies related to which animals could and should be saved and those for which killing would be an act of mercy.

Everyone comes to animal welfare with differing ideas about life and death and about what constitutes quality of life. There are rescue groups so attached to preserving life that they will go to great lengths to keep a suffering animal alive. Others lack the vision and drive to see how older animals can be placed in homes where they will live happily for whatever time they have left.

In 1989 Rich Avanzino, then head of the San Francisco SPCA, transferred their animal control contract back to the local government. He transformed the San Francisco SPCA from an extension of animal control into an organization focused on the sole objective of saving lives. Five years later Avanzino declared San Francisco the nation’s first “no-kill” city. He didn’t mean that San Francisco SPCA was “no-kill”. He meant that the whole city, including the municipal animal control facility located next door, was euthanizing fewer than 10% of all animal intakes.

Avanzino received a tremendous amount of criticism for the actions he took to achieve “no-kill”. The first question on the agenda was how to pay for it. Fortunately, enough board members were committed to this new idea that they were able to sell it to others who were willing to put their money where it could make a real difference.

While crossing this hurdle, Avanzino faced unimaginable resistance from the new animal control agency operated by the city. It is a phenomenon of animal welfare organizations that I won’t even try to explain. It is why Best Friends Animal Society uses the tag line, “Together We Can Save Them All.” They know all too well the strife that exists and they repeat this line in every marketing piece they put out in an effort to raise individual awareness of the folly we fall prey to.

Animal welfare has come a long way in 27 years and it shows, even in the southeast. Our local municipal animal control agencies had the month of April at “no-kill” in Muscogee and Harris counties. This doesn’t just happen spontaneously. It is happening because all the major animal welfare agencies are working together to achieve a specific goal.

Hopefully, we are learning to respect and trust each other enough that we can simply focus on our own small part of the “no-kill” equation that, when practiced, is changing the face of animal welfare throughout the United States.

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