

Sunday Column – Being of Service
For publication 8.27.17

I have a couple of animal stories and a rant about public policy cooking in the oven right now but they're not quite ready to come out this week. I decided instead to ponder the work we do in animal welfare and how it is that some are able to stay in it without becoming too terribly cynical or overcome with grief.

Last weekend we were told about a dog that had been hit by a car. The owner, an older woman with Alzheimer's, loved her dog very much but could not afford to take her to a vet. A neighbor intervened when she learned of the dog's condition a week after the accident. She contacted animal control to see if anything could be done to help this pet.

We checked with animal control because the woman asked us for help to find out what happened to her dog. Unfortunately, the story doesn't get any better. It was too late to save this dog who was humanely euthanized. It isn't always about cruelty or neglect. This woman did the best she could for her dog. Makes me want to cry but somehow I don't. Instead, I move on to the next opportunity to be of service.

Our Pets for Life Program is in full swing now. PAWS Humane and Columbus, Georgia are very fortunate that the program coordinator, Carolina, was born to do this work. We are looking for grants to make the position full-time.

She spends two days a week knocking on doors in our target neighborhoods. One includes a large population of Spanish speakers. Carolina was raised bi-lingual by Spanish speaking parents. That, along with her natural empathy, make her uniquely adept at building relationships with folks who may not be comfortable opening the door for just anyone.

We especially like this neighborhood for its diversity and the mild culture clash that has occurred around the keeping of pets. We feel we can do good work here, not just for animals, but for the people who love them and even for the people who don't. This neighborhood is no stranger to working out the problems that arise out of living in close proximity to others. They have an established neighborhood development association that has welcomed us with open arms. They have become allies in the work we do.

Carolina recently began working with a neighborhood that attracted us because of its very high poverty rate. The work here is a bit more labor intensive. Fewer of these citizens are keen on the idea of bringing in their pet for spay or neuter surgery. Many don't have access to transportation so we have to make arrangements to pick up and return their pets. This can become surprisingly complicated.

The work here requires more understanding and patience on our part as we build relationships that eventually earn their trust. Anyone who loves their pet should be able to understand this reticence.

In the course of our work, we see dogs who have lived much of their lives on chains. Bedraggled, unowned cats appear with litters of kittens, some of whom may not make it to a long and happy life. Though the sad things we see in our work can't be unseen, we have to guard against going down the road of grief, or even worse, outrage. This only hurts us and renders us unable to continue to work effectively, if at all.

To continue requires that we focus on the abundant good we see happening around us and hold up the vision of the No-Kill Community that we know we can and will achieve one day. To get there requires that we keep our day-to-day attention on being of maximum service at each and every opportunity.

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 byeo@pawshumane.org with your comments and story ideas.