



Nonprofits rush to find homes for pets left behind

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With thousands of foreclosures sweeping the Golden State, animals are feeling the wrath of a declining economy.

By Rebecca Villaneda, Peninsula News

Local animal rescue groups are scrambling to find foster and permanent homes for the many pets left homeless after families were forced to relocate to smaller houses during tough economic times.

"I probably average about two or three calls per week about people who have lost their house, and they have to move," said Arleen Rooney, pointing to a small dog named Pebbles who was turned in by its owners from Chula Vista, Calif. Rooney, who runs St. Anthony's K9 Rescue in Lomita, is one of many foster parents that help Whiskers & Tails with its weekly adoptions at Kritter Korral in Harbor City.

Rooney, who has rescued animals for 20 years, said dogs do better in a home environment than in kennels.

"We can gauge their [temperament] with other dogs, I house train them, socialize them and find the right match for a home," Rooney said. "Not all dogs can be saved, but its better to save one than none."

Lynn Amano, founder of Whiskers & Tails in Rancho Palos Verdes, said she's doing her best to keep the families and their animals together.

"This morning I got a phone message at 8 a.m. saying, 'Can you place my orange cat, because we have no money to buy food and I just lost my job, and we love the cat.' ... You get the whole history, about how this cat grew up with the kids, and she's out looking for work everyday and it's expensive, with bills and food," Amano said. "So I [asked] the lady, 'What can I do in order for you to keep the cat?'" she said.

The answer was food. And Amano agreed to provide the family with cat food until they get back on their feet.

“And, of course, the kids are ecstatic, because they were so sad and depressed that they’re losing their companion animal due to the economy ... It makes all the difference; it affects these kids all their lives.”

To facilitate in placing pets, Amano recently signed up with www.petfinder.com. While it’s helped, she can’t help but notice the number of pets still available. Last year it was about 260,000 animals nationwide and just last week the number was at more than 350,000.

“I’m getting tons and tons of people dumping animals left and right,” she said. “Realtors are calling because they feel responsible for the bank-owned properties that are selling when they find an animal in the backyard.

“It’s a regular thing right now with people moving out, leaving their animals, irresponsible owners ... And then I have people that are backyard breeding when they could go to the shelters or go to petfinder.com, and put their zip code in, their criteria and get an animal,” she added.

Amano moved her pet adoptions to Kritter Korral from Petco because she was getting more people leaving their pets than adopting, so it was a fresh start.

“Pet ownership is a responsibility; it’s a lifelong responsibility, not six months until the puppy turns 1,” she said. “The older a dog gets the less chance [it] has of getting adopted, and that’s our big problem.”

Roger D. Mortimer, an independent “trap and release,” or TNR, provider works with rescue groups and corporations such as Boeing and UCLA.

The idea behind TNR is catching the animal, spay and neuter it and release it. Mortimer, who mainly works with cats, has done TNR for close to five years.

“[People’s] mentality is that cats are no different than rodents, and because of that concept, they feel a lot more freer when they leave, move out and get evicted just to leave their cats behind,” Mortimer said. “Some leave them indoors without food, and just expect that people are going to come in and find them. And in a lot of cases they don’t. By the time they do, they’re dead or emaciated. Or people just dump them outside and expect that they are going to live on the rats and birds out there, which is a [misconception].”

Cats left behind begin to create feral populations, and that’s when Mortimer steps in. Known as the “cat man,” Mortimer also fosters and socializes the psychosocial feral cats.

“I try and get them rehabilitated to get them adopted,” he said. “I only do that for certain amounts of them because I don’t want to reduce the colonies so much,” he said.

Mortimer worked with UCLA to get rid of a feral cat colony that inundated the campus, but when all the animals were gone the rodent population increased.

“They think that you can just remove all those cats and we won’t have any problems ... No, if you

remove those cats, other cats see that's an open territory and they all move in. So it's a constant problem," he said. "With TNR ... you maintain that colony, and that colony is going to maintain itself to a degree."

UCLA asked for some of its cats back.

"You're going to have stragglers in and out of the colony, but at least now they're mostly fixed, not mass producing," Mortimer said.

Money donated from the various corporations Mortimer works with goes back to the animals, in particular to help Whiskers & Tails. However, a lot of expenses come out of his pocket.

And why does he do it?

"For the animals, and because other people won't. There are so many people out there who are willing to neglect and abuse the animals, and someone's got to look out for them," Mortimer said. "I think some of the problem is that you have certain cultures who have a very low regard for animals to begin with. So it's trying to change that whole cultural view, which is a huge challenge."

As far as Amano, she made saving animals her priority more than 20 years ago because she got another chance at life. She wanted to return the favor.

"I'm a recovering alcoholic/drug addict, and I've been clean and sober for 26 years. And through all the trials and what I've been through in my life, I want to give back," she said. "I've evolved, [and began] seeing more than myself. It's not all about me, and it just seems the more you give the more you get back — and you don't do it to get back ... I learn more from these animals and young kids than I could ever give to them."

Whiskers & Tails also is an outlet for high schoolers looking for volunteer opportunities. They help at the adoption events and also walk the foster dogs to help socialize them.

Palos Verdes High School sophomore Victoria Arnold bakes and sells cookies for dogs and leaves donation jars at local shops to raise money for the nonprofit.

"I was raised with dogs and cats, and I was one of the kids that had to have some animal around just because," Arnold said. "I've always liked having them as companions, and it's really true that dogs will always be your friend."

Peninsula High sophomore Isabelle Chen, who started Peninsula Animal Club, helps raise money for The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals through various fund-raisers.

"It's nice when you see them get adopted, and you know you made a difference in that animal's life," Chen said.

"I'm educating kids on how to be responsible pet owners and how to just respect anything and everything about an animal," Amano said. "How to screen people, and how to place an animal —

you don't just give an animal away. The kids are very surprising; it's nice to know they have their own initiative."

David Jones, owner of Kritter Korral, lends his store out to the weekly pet adoptions for free.

"I don't even look at it as a donation, I just want to see the animals get homes ... Our place is a great corner, and a lot of people travel this corner everyday," Jones said. "There's a lot of animals out there that need homes; we don't sell dogs or cats for that reason. We actually direct people down to the shelters. The shelters are overrun with animals. There are a lot of animals that need homes — that need people who are going to love them and this is a great ways to get them into homes."

Kritter Korral offers 20 percent off a purchase to anyone who adopts an animal from a shelter and brings their adoption papers within seven days.

Whiskers & Tails, which started with a sole pig named Philemena, who's still around, has grown to a preserve of sorts for all types of animals.

"For every phone call that I get that's not so good, there's a counter phone call telling me something that gives me light and more ideas. There is hope, and I have to keep thinking that," Amano said. "It's just a perpetual motion. I just keep doing it one day at a time."

To donate or adopt from Whiskers & tails, visit www.whiskerstails.org. The Web site also provides information on local low-cost and free spay and neuter providers.

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Whiskers & Tails volunteer Sandra Larios holds Buffy at a pet adoption event at Kritter Korral.