

The following article is the *unedited version* of a *My Turn* article entitled:

“The Dirty Little Secret in Your Community”

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It is amazing how a seemingly minor incident in one's youth can set a person on a lifelong path. I recall a day long ago when, as a ten-year-old kid growing up in suburban Harper Woods, Michigan, I rescued a lost dog from a busy street. Fortunately, the dog had a license, and I was able to find her owner. We decided to meet at the neighborhood veterinary hospital, where I happily returned "Sadie" to her frantic owner. I was stunned when the distraught lady gave me a five-dollar bill as a reward. I remember thinking, "Wow, you can make a living doing this."

That happy reunion introduced me to the wonderful staff at the veterinary hospital. These folks quickly became my heroes. So influential was their love and compassion for animals on me that at school I started writing 'DVM' after my name! I started going

by the hospital almost daily to visit and ask for a job. After a few years of being told I was "too young," a kind lady named Irene, sitting behind the front counter, said "Wait a moment." She went to speak with Dr. Tuck, who peaked around the corner, looked at Irene and said, "Okay". My heart leapt as Irene came back to ask if I could start the next day.

Those were some of the best years of my life. I worked my way through High School and College as a veterinary technician grateful for the opportunity to help so many animals. But I soon found that there was a dark side to this wonderful job. The hospital also served as a local "dog pound." The police brought us the lost and homeless dogs and cats they found wandering the streets. We were able to return some lost pets, but not all of them. I would not fully understand until much later the profound impact that caring for healthy, happy pets prior to putting them to death would have on me.

I never did become a veterinarian. In 1976 I moved to Phoenix, and by 1985 I was a pastor of a small church, looking to rescue lost souls instead of lost dogs. When a time came that I needed extra income, I sought employment with Maricopa County's municipal animal control department. The bitter reality I found in Harper Woods was multiplied ten thousand fold in Arizona. In Harper Woods we rescued less than 50 homeless pets a year. In Maricopa County we rescued 62,000 dogs and cats every year, and tragically, over 70 percent were euthanized.

I suddenly realized I had discovered every community's dirty little secret - that hundreds, if not thousands, of healthy, loving pets are killed and sent to a landfill or incinerated for no other reason than that they are homeless. Most people would never support such a practice if they knew it was occurring. In fact, nearly 70 percent of all Americans own and love a pet. But because the way we deal with homeless pets is often hidden away in a part of town that most people don't frequent, the public remains comfortably unaware, and the allocation of resources needed to end euthanasia is not made a priority.

Over the years I witnessed and participated in the horror of this hidden practice, until in the mid-90s I resigned from the ministry to work full time to bring attention to ending unnecessary pet euthanasia. In 1998, I was appointed director of Maricopa County's animal control program where I implemented programs that transformed Maricopa County from what some called the worst animal welfare

community in the United States to what many today call the most progressive and innovative. Maricopa County became the number one pet adoption agency in the world, (adopting nearly 22,000 pets annually), and home to the first municipal "no-kill" shelter, while the euthanasia rate fell to a historic low.

Maricopa County became a model for many communities, which prompted my recruitment by Mayor Bloomberg in New York City. Although I was quite content with my life and work in Arizona, the call to spread the "no-kill" message beckoned. Where better to preach this message than New York City? (If you do it here, you can do it anywhere, right?) In January 2004 I accepted the position as director of Animal Care & Control of New York City and immediately began to implement the same programs I developed in Arizona.

New York City pet adoptions soared 105% and euthanasia plummeted, 17 percent in 2004 and another 25 percent thus far in 2005. Fewer animals are dying in New York City today than any other time in history.

The one constant I always heard concerning pet overpopulation was that this problem is so overwhelming that nothing can really be done to solve it. Today, this kid turned preacher can shout from the rooftops: Ending the killing of healthy, adoptable animals can be done, it is being done -- and it can be done in your city, town, and county too!

Mahatma Gandhi taught us that the greatness of a nation and its moral progress is best judged by how we treat our animals. If that is true, then it is time we reject the catch-and-kill methodologies of the past and implement proven non-lethal programs that reveal we can truly be a humane society.

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AC&C Programs:

- **Big Fix** sponsors low- and no-cost spay and neutering services for pets in low-income households.
- **New Hope** is a network of over 100 pet rescue, support and adoption agencies in the eastern US who work with AC&C in the process of locating homes for the animals we rescue.
- **Safety Net** helps pets and their families stay together through difficult financial times or relocations.
- **Star (Special Treatment and Recovery)** provides medical treatment to severely injured animals rescued by AC&C with help from local veterinarians.
- **TLC (Teach Love and Compassion)** provides youth from inner-city neighborhoods with employment and job training in animal care.
- **Family Dog Program** improves the quality of life and adoption rate of AC&C sheltered dogs through behavior training of our volunteers taught by expert dog trainer, Brian Kilcommons.
- **Fostering** volunteers offer temporary homes for special needs animals.