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No Kill: Q&A with Robin Starr, Richmond SPCA

No social movement has monolithic thinking, and our cause is no different. There are fault lines on many issues, whether the treatment of farm animals, the use of animals in research and testing, or other categories of animal use. One of the deepest fissures in the companion animal domain has been over the question of euthanasia and whether it is acceptable for humane organizations to euthanize healthy and treatable animals. There are about 8 million dogs and cats who enter shelters (both public institutions and private, charitable organizations), and about 3.7 million are put down, including 3 million who are healthy or treatable.



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While that's too many animals, the trend has been moving in the right direction, with the pro-sterilization campaigns launched by The HSUS and others in the 1970s having helped drop euthanasia numbers from as many as 20 million dogs and cats in 1975. So many shelter leaders I know are desperate to break the cycle of euthanasia and find a home for every adoptable animal. And helping the shelters are a vast network of rescue and feral cat organizations that do remarkable work day in and day out to save lives and give animals a second chance.

It is always dangerous to provide too much credit to any one person as the intellectual spark for a movement, but for me longtime animal advocate Ed Duvin deserves recognition. He wrote a series of widely circulated essays starting in 1989 that questioned how euthanasia had come to play such a major role within animal shelters. His original essay, "In the Name of Mercy," argued that we had lost our way as a cause by treating the killing of animals in shelters as routine and mission-consistent.

"Although euthanasia cannot presently be avoided, it borders on the surreal to describe the killing of millions of healthy beings as a 'merciful' act," wrote Duvin, in "In the Name of Mercy." "Whether strays or surrenders, these animals inescapably experience the kind of psychological trauma and terror that we find unacceptable for caged zoo and laboratory animals. Some are exposed to various forms of physical mishandling, and all suffer from the anguishing ordeal of being processed and warehoused in a foreign and frightening environment. Euthanasia might be a relatively painless end to this journey of terror, but each death represents an abject failure for all of us—not an act of mercy." Duvin's argument resonated with some, and repelled others, who asked for his head. But the force of his ideas has stood the test of time, and gained momentum.

A second pioneer is Rich Avanzino, who served during the late 1980s and 1990s as CEO of the San Francisco SPCA. In 1994, he provided a good-home guarantee for all dogs and cats at his facility, and he's been leading the charge ever since. He now heads Maddie's Fund, the nation's largest animal protection foundation (in terms of assets), and that organization is committed to community-based work to achieve a no-kill nation. Maddie's Fund and The HSUS have joined with the Ad Council to launch The Shelter Pet Project, a multi-million dollar marketing campaign to end euthanasia of healthy and treatable animals by persuading more people to adopt dogs and cats from animal shelters. (Today, only about one in five pets in homes come from shelters and rescue groups.)

In the last few years—despite the shrill efforts of a few no-kill advocates whose work has retarded the progress of that cause by alienating so many people, especially within the sheltering community—there is broader acceptance of no-kill principles, and an acknowledgment that it must be our goal as a movement to find homes for healthy animals and to halt the killing of animals except when it's medically necessary. There is a pathway, although a challenging and difficult one, to see an end in the years ahead to the routine euthanasia of animals in shelters. I know that among the celebrants will be the leaders of shelters, along with all other serious-minded animal advocates.

A third pioneer is [Robin Starr](#), CEO of the Richmond SPCA. Robin joined our field in 1997, and several years ago, she committed her institution, in a major American city in the South, to the [goal of halting euthanasia](#) of healthy and treatable animals. She was one of the first to put no-kill principles into practice in a major American city, and she's done it in a brilliant way. I have long admired her work.

I asked her to answer questions about the broader debate, to provide a full-throated argument for her viewpoint, and to answer some of the charges leveled by critics. It's someone like Robin—a sensible, measured voice and a person in the thick of it, not just lobbing rhetorical bombs as a bystander to the day-to-day struggles of shelters—who should be in the forefront of the no-kill movement. I'll provide her answers to my questions over three days, and here is the first installment. Tune in to the blog in the coming days to see the complete interview.

Wayne Pacelle: As background for readers, when did the Richmond SPCA become a no-kill animal shelter? What was your inspiration for this goal?

Robin Starr: In January of 2002, the Richmond SPCA became a no-kill organization. At that time, we ceased accepting more animals than we could care for without resorting to euthanasia of healthy or treatable animals. In 2001, we had announced that, in partnership with Richmond Animal Care and Control, we were jointly committed to achieving a city in which no healthy homeless animal would lose his life by 2008 at the latest. We accomplished that goal two years early (in 2006) and have sustained it ever since.

Our inspiration was without question the life saving successes achieved by the San Francisco SPCA under the leadership of Rich Avanzino. We were deeply impressed with the live release rate that they had achieved, which was unequalled at the time anywhere else. We believed that we could replicate their model in Richmond and we did.

WP: Do you think the term “no-kill” is the right one?

RS: I personally am comfortable with that term because I believe that it is a plain-spoken term, and we are always better off when we use terms that most people can understand even if they do not have expertise in a particular field. I believe that “no-kill,” whether used with respect to an organization or a community, means that no healthy or treatable homeless animal is losing his life there. By that definition, the Richmond SPCA is no-kill, but the City of Richmond is not yet no-kill since we are saving all of the healthies and a substantial portion, but not all, of the treatables in our city. We are working hard toward saving all of the treatables soon, and when we do that, we will also be a no-kill city.

I always explain to people who are not in our field that what we mean at the Richmond SPCA when we say that we are no-kill is that the only time we euthanize an animal is under the same circumstances that a responsible pet owner would euthanize their beloved pet. They always seem to find that to be perfectly reasonable. That said, I have no problem with other terms being used such as “adoption guarantee” if it makes people more comfortable and allows us to get on with the truly important work of accomplishing that end.



Photo courtesy of Saved Images
Robin Starr, CEO of the Richmond SPCA.

WP: How did the reception within the Richmond community compare to the reception within the broader humane movement?

RS: It depends on what part of the Richmond community you are talking about. Once we announced our plans to change our way of operating, we were aggressively attacked by people with other animal welfare organizations in our community and state. We had been a highly traditional organization for a very long time. We had performed many of the roles that should have been done by the City of Richmond, and we euthanized a large number of animals on a regular basis. The way we had been operating had been producing ever increasing euthanasia rates in our community so we could not imagine that it was something that should be clung to. Our detractors were very unhappy that we were going to change substantially our way of operating with which they had become comfortable. But those detractors were almost exclusively with other animal groups.

The response of the larger community was positive at the beginning and has become extremely supportive over the years. Our community has come to understand how we operate and to appreciate that it has reduced the citywide euthanasia rate in Richmond to 19 percent as of 2008.

The local barrage was so intense for a while that I had little time to pay any attention to what the reception was like in the broader humane movement. I think that for quite a while we were really not on the radar screen of the broader movement. That changed as our success in lifesaving began to develop. During that difficult period, I received invaluable support and guidance from both Rich Avanzino and from Ed Sayres who was at the San Francisco SPCA at the time.

The experience that we had with the aggressive negative reaction from animal welfare organizations in our own community was educational for me. Despite their behavior, the response of our larger community was wonderful from the start and the support of our community has grown vastly since that time as we have demonstrated success. It left me with the very firm view that every private organization has the right to determine for themselves the kind and the amount of work for homeless animals that they are going to do without interference from others outside their organization. It also taught me the importance of focusing on your goal and paying attention to those folks whose perspectives you should care about.

WP: Do you think that putting down dogs and cats became normalized within the humane community?

RS: Yes, I do and, to some extent, I think it still is although we are making enormous headway now in changing the paradigm. I have never believed that taking animals' lives is an acceptable solution to the challenges of managing homeless animals in communities. Most people outside our field demonstrate a visceral discomfort with the idea that healthy animals are being killed in shelters—we all have seen that happen. I think there is a message in that gut instinct, but for people in our field that gut instinct got worn down over time because of their need to emotionally cope with the horrors to which they were being exposed.

I have never believed that people who are doing the very tough jobs in shelters should feel any sense of personal guilt because they are generally doing their best in a very miserable situation. However, as a society, we collectively have a great deal that we should feel guilty about. Euthanizing healthy and treatable animals was never the right answer, but it became the accepted answer out of expediency.

WP: If it is not a community-wide no kill commitment, as compared to a single institution declaring itself no kill, is much being accomplished? Is it just a bit of a shell game?

RS: That is a complex question. Certainly, a community-wide collaborative commitment to ending the loss of life is the only thing that will really make a meaningful and sustainable difference for the prospects for survival of the homeless animals of a community. That is how the tough work happens and how real material change for the better for companion animals is going to occur. Collaborative partnerships need to include both private organizations and public agencies, and they must treat each other with mutual respect in reaching a shared goal.

However, I also respect organizations that have the courage to say that they do not believe that taking lives is an acceptable answer to managing the issues of

homeless animals and that, for that reason, they are no longer going to participate in it. That step can be a very meaningful one toward changing the moral imperative for a community. Calling it a shell game suggests that they are trying to mislead the public. So long as the single institution is not misrepresenting what it is doing, I have never believed that a private organization is somehow derelict in its duties if it does not participate in taking the lives of healthy or treatable animals. No private organization needs to be doing something it does not think is right, but it does need to be sincerely working on a community coalition dedicated to ending the killing for the entire community.

Stay tuned to the blog in the coming days to see the complete interview.

Posted by Wayne Pacelle on 07 December 2009 at 3:28 PM in [Humane Society at Work](#) , [The Movement & Beyond](#)

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Greetings from Bhutan: Saving Street Dogs

Perhaps the fastest-growing component of our work at The HSUS is our international activity, driven by our affiliate, [Humane Society International](#). Recently, Andrew Weinstein, a member of the [board of directors](#) of The HSUS, was vacationing in Asia, and stumbled across our work in the course of his travels—and the highlight for him was running across our spaying and neutering work in the remote Bumthang valley of central Bhutan. I thought his serendipitous encounter was quite remarkable, and I asked him to provide an account.



Weinstein
A dog rests in the Phobjikha Valley.

[Bhutan](#) is a small mountain kingdom in the Himalayas surrounded by two giant neighbors, India and China. Bhutan's population—roughly the same as Charlotte, N.C.—is spread across nearly 15,000 square miles of stunning snow-peaked mountains, lush green valleys, and mountain rainforests. Though not wealthy, the country is a global leader on environmental preservation, and its constitution not only requires the government to protect biodiversity and preserve the environment, it also explicitly mandates that more than 60 percent of the country's land be maintained under forest cover for all time.

One area where Bhutan has a huge environmental problem, however, is [street dogs](#). As a Buddhist country, the Bhutanese commendably will not use lethal methods to destroy or control any animal population, but that has led to an explosion of stray dogs across the country, particularly in towns and villages. If you are visiting the capital city of Thimphu, you definitely need earplugs if you plan to sleep comfortably through the all-night barking.

To help address this problem in a humane manner, HSI conducted a four-month pilot program in coordination with the Government of Bhutan earlier this year in which it sterilized and vaccinated 2,866 dogs in Thimphu. Based on the success of that program, HSI [launched a larger, nationwide program](#) this fall in coordination with the government to sterilize up to 50,000 dogs over the next 3-5 years.

Although I knew the program had recently launched in Bhutan, I didn't expect to see its great work almost everywhere we went in the country. On our very first



Weinstein
Andrew sees an HSI van in the Bhutan capital of Thimphu.