

## Four Million Shelter Animals Want *You!*



### **Wanted:**

*Shelter directors with imagination. No experience necessary.*

What are important characteristics of an effective animal shelter director? A love of animals? A passion for saving lives? Someone who demands excellence? Yes, yes, and yes. They must also be hard working, effective, determined, willing to take risks, solution oriented, accountable, someone who leads by example, and someone who can do a lot of things with limited resources. I've heard a No Kill shelter director quip that a good leader is someone with "the ability to hide their panic"—to appear in control even in the face of the chaos swirling around you.

In the end, all of these characteristics are important. And they include everything you want in a leader. They include everything you and the animals in your community deserve and have a right to expect from someone running your animal shelter—the shelter that is supposed to reflect your values, paid for with your tax and philanthropic dollars.

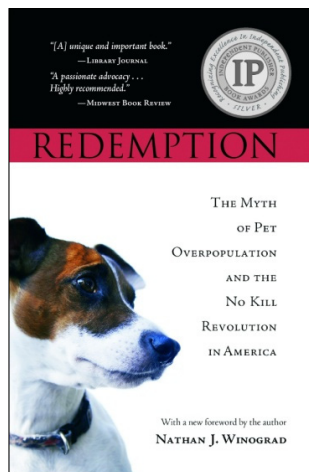
But I would argue that the *most* important factor, the one that trumps all the others, the one that determines whether the shelter director—and therefore the No Kill mission—succeeds or fails in a particular community is imagination.

**W**hen I left San Francisco to take over an open admission animal control shelter in upstate New York, I wasn't sure what I was in for. My experience was limited to the San Francisco SPCA, sitting on the Board of Directors for a No Kill humane society in Palo Alto, and rescue. I talked to shelters in other communities and I believed in the model created in San Francisco, but as to how long it would take to end the killing at an animal control shelter? I wasn't sure. But I also knew that I had to try.

And now that the way has been paved, now that we know the answer is “overnight,” the time is ripe for wholesale regime change. Because today, roughly 3,000 or so “shelter” directors refuse to comprehensively implement the No Kill Equation. They are killing in the face of readily available lifesaving alternatives. And, in so doing, they are holding back the will of millions of Americans who love animals and want to see their needless killing come to an end.

But we can change that. We can reclaim these shelters. And you can help: By taking on positions of leadership at shelters across the country. Running a shelter no longer has to mean rampant and endless killing, followed by excuse-making and mind-numbing, patently-false justifications for doing so.

To create a No Kill nation, we need two things. We need laws that remove the discretion shelter directors have to avoid doing what is in the best interests of animals and kill them needlessly. And we need regime change.



In *Redemption*, I write that:

*Anyone with a deep and abiding love for animals and a “can do” attitude can take on positions of leadership at SPCAs, humane societies, and animal control shelters across the nation, and quickly achieve the kind of lifesaving results that were once dismissed as nothing more than “hoaxes” or “smoke and mirrors” by the leaders of the past.*

*With no allegiance to the status quo or faith in conventional “wisdom,” new leaders can cause dog and cat deaths to plummet in cities and counties by rejecting the “adopt some and kill the rest” inertia of the past one hundred years...*

Do you have what it takes?

## A Thought Experiment

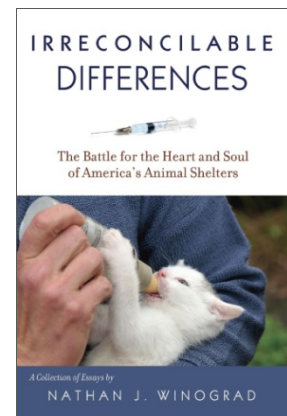
Imagine you run an open admission shelter. Your per capita intake is higher than the national average. Like many communities, you have pockets of affluence, but there are also incredible amounts of poverty. You are getting your daily influx of animals. And then you get the call. The state has requested assistance in closing down a puppy mill. They are asking other shelters for help, but you would take the lead. On day one, you would get three times the number of dogs than available kennel space. You already have dogs in many of your kennels and you get dogs in every day already. And on top of that, you are not just getting any dogs. You are getting dogs with the most serious conditions: dogs who are blind, with untreated tumors, rotten



teeth, dogs with neurological problems, none of them housetrained, under-socialized dogs, heavily traumatized dogs, dogs who lived inside pet carriers their whole lives.

If this shelter killed the dogs, some people would not criticize it. They would believe that the fault lies with the puppy mill. And there is truth there: Fault does lie with the puppy mill for exploiting, neglecting, and abusing those poor dogs. But once the dogs are in the care of the shelter, the calculus changes. Whether those dogs live or die is now up to the shelter. At that point, as I write in *Irreconcilable Differences*,

*The choice is not ... a choice between continued suffering and death at the pound. This is not what the animals face. Once they are rescued from abuse, more suffering should no longer be an option.*



The only choice left is whether the shelter will perpetuate the harm by killing them or whether it won't. In sheltering, we like to fall back on the cliché that killing is a last resort. But many of us know firsthand that while shelter directors give lip service to that, it often is a first resort: The thing that is routinely and casually done when the cages get full. The thing that is done even when they aren't full. Because that is just what we've done in shelters for 100 years and collectively, we stopped imagining a different outcome. But in reality, this "solution" is the most inhumane, violent, and extreme of all possible responses.

If you can imagine a different outcome than the status quo; a different outcome than killing; if when faced with adversity, you can imagine how you might do things differently; and you give yourself permission to try it even when conventional wisdom says you should not; you're already more prepared than the vast majority of shelter directors in this country.

*"When faced with seemingly impossible tasks, we ask the question, 'What can we do to achieve results without sacrificing our principles?' as we pursue solutions with gusto.*

*Then it doesn't seem so impossible anymore."*

- Mike Fry,  
Animal Ark

If we had never started killing, the suggestion that we should would be shocking and preposterous. Yet custom has reconciled those in the animal sheltering industry to it to the point that too many shelter directors often see it as inevitable. By contrast, it is impossible to imagine Child Protective Services taking in abused, abandoned, or just homeless children and then killing them. And as No Kill advocates, we should no more tolerate it for animals. In our society, killing needy animals should be equally unthinkable. So what would happen if you threw out the calculus? What would you do if instead of debating whether killing was a first vs. a last resort, it was no resort? What if you simply took killing off of the table?

The pro-killing Naysayers claim you'd be a hoarder. That the animals would pile up and get sick. But the Naysayers are wrong. The data proves it. While about four million dogs and cats will lose their lives in shelters this year, about three million will lose their lives but for a home. The rest are a combination of unsocialized community cats who need TNR, animals who can be reclaimed if shelters did a better job of matching lost with found animals, irremediably suffering and hopeless ill or injured animals, and vicious dogs with a poor prognosis for rehabilitation.

*"As a leader you need to be willing to take risks and challenge accepted thinking."*

- Michael Linke,  
RSPCA Australian Capital Territory

By contrast, there are over 23 million people who are going to get an animal next year. Some are already committed to adopting from a shelter. Some are already committed to getting one from a breeder or other commercial source. But 17 million have not decided where that animal will come from and research shows they can be influenced to adopt from a shelter. That's 17 million people vying for roughly 3 million animals. So even if 80% of those people got their animal from somewhere other than a shelter, we could still zero out the killing and be a No Kill nation.

Experience proves it too. There are communities with extremely high per capita intake rates who have done it. There are now No Kill communities across the U.S. and abroad: in New York and in California, in Colorado and Virginia, in Utah, Indiana, Kansas, and Kentucky, in Nevada, and across the globe. And the one thing that all of them have in common are leaders with a "can do" attitude—leaders with imagination.

Where will you house the dogs? Who will provide the immediate care? How will you pay for it? Who will treat the rotten teeth, the tumors, and the matted fur? Who will adopt them? We know what would happen in most communities. After killing the dogs, the Executive Director would be talking about "public irresponsibility," saying the dogs were "unadoptable," and how "euthanasia" relieved them of their suffering. "Public irresponsibility," "unadoptable," "euthanasia." All code words showing a profound lack of imagination. What would you do?

Would you call in all the volunteers? Would you call in all the staff who had a day off? Would you call out all the rescue groups? Would you call the media? Would you announce extended adoption hours and adoption promotions? All the staff, all the volunteers are looking to you. If you are confident, so are they. If you believe, they believe.

This is the scenario I faced a number of years ago. And I want to share with you what happened. First, I employed the "appear in control despite the chaos" strategy: I hid my panic. Then I employed a bit of imagination: What if we put up a big tent in the backyard to house the dogs? So I called up a local party rental store and asked them to donate a wedding tent in exchange for promotion. Whatever the circumstances, it was my job to imagine a solution. If it didn't work, it was my job to imagine another solution. Leaders do not throw up their hands and say, if we can't do this one thing (in this case, kill);



there isn't anything else we can do. If a door is closed, you open it. If it is locked, you kick it down. If it is reinforced, you smash a window. Not enough veterinarians? What if I called my kids orthodontist to come in and look at some teeth? How different could teeth be?

And when the vans arrived and the dogs were carried off, it was an awesome sight to behold. Volunteers had established an assembly line bathing the dogs, delicately cutting the mats, cutting toe nails. A local veterinarian cancelled her appointments and spent the day doing triage, with staff and

volunteers acting as assistants, and then spent the evening doing surgeries. A local dentist came in to clean, fix, and pull teeth.

We had already created the infrastructure necessary to save lives. We had the No Kill Equation in place. Programs such as foster care, comprehensive adoption programs, socialization and behavior rehabilitation, medical care, working with rescue groups, marketing and promotions, a robust volunteer base, and more. Programs that allow a shelter to save lives not just in ordinary circumstances; but that could be called upon to give more during extraordinary ones.

All I needed to do as the shelter's director was to give people permission to help. All I had to do was to create the environment that *allowed* people to help; to give them the tools they needed to be able to do so. When you make it easy for people to do the right thing, they will. And within 48 hours, we had emptied the shelter without a single dog losing his life, without even unfurling the tent.

Of course we owe it to the animals to do these things. That goes without saying. But we also owe it to people: The people clamoring for change in their communities. The people who are fighting shelters that refuse to do these things, but who would be a shelters' biggest cheerleaders and fiercest allies if shelter directors stopped viewing them as enemies and partnered with them to save lives. Killing those dogs would have been unfair to the volunteers who gladly spent the day caring for them, unfair to the orthodontist who still talked about that day years later. They had so much to give and would have felt so much anguish had our "solution" been simply to kill. As much as it was my responsibility to save those dogs, it was also my duty to allow those who wanted to help them to do so. It is a leaders' job to give people that opportunity, not to turn them away with platitudes about public irresponsibility and the inevitability of killing.

### **The Buck Stops Here**

One shelter director who runs a No Kill open admission shelter talks about turning challenges into opportunities. Another says his job is to get out of the way of people who want to save lives. And a third says that patience is not a virtue when lives are at stake. Those who are successful at saving lives will tell you the same thing. When you take killing off the table; when you give people permission to help; when

you create the environment that allows them to do so; when you give them the tools they need to succeed; great things happen, and you succeed.

You don't succeed in five years. You don't succeed in ten years. You succeed *right away*. You empty the shelter of animals the good way. The key to success is the No Kill Equation, programs that include TNR for unsocialized community cats, foster care, behavior rehabilitation, and good medical care. But there is one more element of the No Kill Equation. The most important one. And that is leadership.



Reno, Nevada (Washoe County) takes in more animals per capita than many communities. It takes in roughly four times the per capita rate of dogs and cats than Los Angeles, five times the rate of San Francisco, seven times the rate of New York City, and over two times the

national average. As a tourism-based economy, it was especially hard hit by the Great Recession: foreclosures were at an all-time high, it had the second highest unemployment rate in the nation, and on top of that, it has education funding among the lowest in the nation, and a national study that looked at driving while intoxicated arrest and liver disease rates named it the second drunkest city in the nation.

If there is anywhere that No Kill could not work according to traditional sheltering dogma, it is Washoe County. But it is working. In one year, they lowered the death rate by over 50%. In one year, they increased the adoption rate as much as 84%. They are saving nine out of ten animals despite taking in over 15,000 per year. Why?

The technical answer: They are implementing the programs and services of the No Kill Equation. But the more immediate one, the one that explains how they did it so quickly, is leadership. Leadership that imagined a different outcome. This past year, the roads department decided it was going to do road work right in front of the shelter. So as not to disturb work traffic, they were going to do it on the weekend, impacting the shelter's adoptions by limiting the public's access to the shelter.



Saturday is the shelter's biggest adoption day of the week and it was packed with animals. If you were the shelter director, what would you do? If the road department told you there was nothing they could do, would you leave it at that? Would you take the animals outside if need be? Would you bring in the media to get their attention? Would you force them to make sure there was access to the shelter even amidst the construction chaos? Would you have volunteers in costumes directing traffic for adoptions? Would you have the roads department

and the construction company pay for an advertisement in the newspaper asking people to come down and adopt even during construction? How about waiving adoption fees by having a “Pardon Our Dust” adoption event?

If you can imagine doing that, then imagine this. That weekend, the shelter adopted more than *twice* the number of animals than a typical weekend. Roadwork turned out to be a blessing in disguise. It increased the adoption rate by 130% and raised \$2,000 in donations.

*“When we are faced with a challenge, we work to find a solution that will not sacrifice the lives of animals. That may require being unconventional.”*

- Bonney Brown,  
Nevada Humane Society

A couple of years ago, I was brought in by the Nevada Humane Society Board of Directors to help them reform their shelter. It was a shelter with ineffective, uncaring managers, a hostile relationship with rescue groups, and was reliant on killing. I did a staff and community survey. NHS was given a “poor” rating over a wide range of issues. Comments were mostly negative and coalesced around several themes such as a failure to respond to calls for service, killing animals needlessly, and poor customer service. The public isn’t making those claims anymore.

When I was called back to assess the changes two years later after helping replace management, having recruited their new director, and assisting in the implementation of policy, a community survey found that 93% support the No Kill initiative; 95% gave the humane society positive ratings on adoption efforts and results; and 93% said NHS has a good or great public image. Open-ended public comments were overwhelmingly positive and coalesced around two major themes: “We believe NHS does an excellent job for the citizens of Washoe County” and “NHS does a great job of taking care of the animals in its care.” That success can be every community’s success. That admiration can be every shelter director’s.

In 1999, San Francisco had the highest save rate of any major urban area in the U.S. In fact, San Francisco was the then-safest community for homeless dogs and cats in the U.S. We were told that this required a unique set of geographical circumstances. We were told that lifesaving success of that magnitude required a unique set of demographics. A bureaucrat at L.A. County’s Department of Animal Care & Control, a shelter with a history of neglect and abuse of animals, said that the only reason San Francisco was successful was because dogs and cats from other communities couldn’t enter because the city was surrounded by water. It was, he said, an island. The late Roger Caras, the then-President of the ASPCA, once said San Francisco’s lifesaving success was due to the City’s large gay population “and the gay community is traditionally the most animal-friendly.” Silly and desperate arguments to be sure. The real reason? Imagination.

Imagination allowed a shelter which has a “capacity” of 375 but found itself with 750 animals due to a hoarding bust (including a bust of 300 dogs) to empty its shelter without killing. Imagination allowed an open admission shelter in Australia to save every baby kitten this year. It allowed an open admission shelter in New Zealand to triple its adoption rate overnight. And yet another open admission shelter in New Zealand to put itself on pace for a stunning 99% save rate this year.

## All They Need is You

I have received a lot of very kind and supportive letters from all over the world because of my work reforming our broken animal shelter system. But the ones from shelter managers and shelter directors who ran kill shelters and then subsequently embraced the No Kill philosophy are some of the most meaningful to me. Letters like this one:

*Nathan,*

*I spent four years working at a humane society... I was a caregiver and euthanasia [sic] technician. Sixty-four animals have died at the end of my needle. When I was killing animals, I stepped outside of myself and was a different person. I held it together all but one time.*

*While killing a mother and her five two-day old children, I broke down. At the time I did not know what set me off. I had always been in control of my emotions and remained focused. Now I can look back and realize I lost it because I let myself feel what I was doing... I never blamed myself for what I did. I played it off as doing what my manager had told me to do and it was how I played my part in animal welfare. I believed that these animals martyred themselves for the movement. That their deaths were not in vain because it would... lead to the end of suffering. How very wrong I was...*

*As a shelter director now, did some of your comments piss me off? Absolutely... But I got what you were saying... I want to believe I am this progressive person, but my life's passion was based on an old model that did nothing but fail. Will I ever go back to being the person I was at [my old humane society]? No, I just cannot. I want to let you know you opened me up to a new train of thought. One I am dedicated to sharing with my community. Thank you.*

It is never too late to do the right thing. But where shelter directors do not willingly change, we owe it to the animals to replace them with those who truly care.

## The Tipping Point

What are the hallmarks of leadership? A love of animals. A passion for saving lives. Hard working. Effective. Determined. Willing to take risks. Solution oriented. Accountable. Someone who demands excellence. Who leads by example. Doing a lot of things with limited resources. But more than all of that: Imagination.

*“Our success began first and foremost with a change in attitude, that was then reflected by a change in our conversation, resulting in a change in our actions.”*

*- Susanne Kogut,  
Charlottesville SPCA*



If you have it, if you are willing to act on it, you are more qualified to run a shelter than the ones currently in those positions. And, for the sake of the animals, I hope you consider doing so. Because not only will you save the animals in your community, but you will help us achieve a No Kill nation.

Today, every killing director is protected by every other killing director. They provide the justification, they provide the legitimacy, and they provide the comparison. As long as we are killing roughly half of all animals in U.S. "shelters," there is a built-in excuse and failure is seen as success. But the more No Kill communities that are achieved, the closer we come to a tipping point. And the more we can say, if they can do it here, and here, and here, and here, and here, ad infinitum, the more isolated and out-of-step killing directors will become. And when that happens, the quicker and more easily we can get rid of those who fail to keep pace. Until Tompkins County became the first No Kill community in U.S. history, No Kill was said to be impossible. When other communities followed suit, it became probable. When we cross the tipping point, it will become inevitable.

Four million shelters animals are looking for imaginative people to take their community shelters out of the dark ages and into the light. They are looking for someone just like *you*.

*"When I hear someone deny that No Kill communities are possible, I think of a shelter in upstate New York, a place where one day it looked sickeningly hopeless, and the next day everything changed... It got out of the habit of killing. Its former incarnation was a place that killed animals and abused people... It was typical of what the American animal sheltering system has been allowed to become. But that place has been dead and gone for almost nine years, and, in its place, an example and an inspiration for others to follow. We live in a cruel, crazy world, one in which shelter killing is a habit... We live in a beautiful world, because we can make the killing stop. I believe in miracles.*

*They happen every day."*

- Valerie Hayes,

"I Was There: One Volunteer's View of a Shelter's Transition to No Kill"

<http://tinyurl.com/24ev7hm>