

## New group appeals for aid in rescuing throwaway pets

Brooks Taylor

The stench hit like a punch in the gut in the thick June air.

Its origin was the rotting corpse of a dog lying just inside a rental house, still tethered by a cable that ran under the exterior metal door and over to an outside pole. An eyewitness said the cable was pulled so taut that the animal was likely not able to move much more than to raise its head a few inches from the floor.

What had been a trusting companion was left to die a slow, cruel death at the hands of her own owners.

In other parts of the home were three more dogs and four cats. Outside, a large dog chained to a tree barked at his rescuers.

The eight survivors from the June 16 rescue galvanized five Tunica women to organize the Tunica Humane Society and begin assisting these and other pets that have been turned out or left behind by their owners.

Sandy Williams, Ellen Nash, Geena Donaphan, Gayle Johnson, and Debbie Pegram form the first Board of Directors for the infant organization.

"Our mission statement says that it is our desire to improve the quality of life for all animals in Tunica County," Williams explained, "and we are committed to saving the lives of those that are endangered and abused."

Three of the five directors attended a workshop Aug. 2-3 sponsored by Mississippi Spay and Neuter. Williams said the trio gathered contacts and vital information that has helped them launch their local effort.

The women have petitioned both the city and county to allow them to work toward adoption for all local shelter animals, Williams said.

"We see Tunica County becoming 'no kill,' because in the past we have euthanized animals that were adoptable," she added.

In the town of Tunica, Bill Wheeler serves as part-time animal control officer. His duties include picking up dogs that are running loose and trying to reunite them with their owners.

"People ought to keep their animals up," Wheeler says with a firm tone. "It's a town ordinance on dogs.

"If I catch 'em, I'm going to put 'em in the pound."

Town mayor Lynn Sturgill says she is happy to learn of the Humane Society's plans.

"We as a city do not have the wherewithal to find people to take these abandoned animals," Sturgill said.

Sturgill said the town currently cooperates with county officials on the care of shelter dogs, providing food in return for shared use of the county's facilities. And the town will cooperate with the Humane Society as they try to locate new homes for the dogs.

"We have agreed to be in close communication with the Tunica Humane Society," Sturgill said,

especially whenever the town's customary five-day grace period ticks down on a particular animal.

Next Tuesday, August 12, the Tunica Humane Society will hold its first general meeting, at 6 p.m. at the downtown Tunica office of Sandy Williams Realty.

Anyone who is interested in fostering dogs to ready them for adoption; organizing fundraisers; making donations; or physically caring for shelter animals is invited to attend Tuesday's meeting.

Securing nonprofit status for the Tunica Humane Society is already well underway, so that donations are tax deductible.

Williams said that grant funds are widely available, but THS must first establish a track record of success. Helping shelter dogs become adoptable and then finding these new homes is THS' first priority, Williams said.

She appeals to locals, "If you are even considering a new pet, please consider one of our pound dogs.

"They all have had very hard lives and they are special animals."

An initial \$250 donation is currently committed toward the care of 13 dogs now at the shelter. These 13, including a healthy mother and five puppies and several other mixed breeds, not only need new homes but also must be checked by a veterinarian, given shots and other medications, and spayed or neutered.

Any of these can be adopted through the Humane Society by paying a \$25 fee. Contact Williams at 662-363-1625 until a hotline number is established.

Although colonies of stray cats are a problem in the town of Tunica, "there are no accommodations for cats.

"So we are concentrating on dogs right now," Williams said.

Establishing a local "high quality, high volume, low cost" spay and neuter program is also high on the THS to-do list.

The existing shelter, five covered pens with concrete floors located on the Tunica County Sheriff's Department grounds, is at capacity. Any additional dogs must go to foster homes until they are adopted or a place opens at the shelter. Volunteers are urgently needed now to foster shelter dogs, Williams says.

"The city and county have agreed not to euthanize another dog without first notifying THS," Williams said.

"If a dog does have to be put down for health or other reasons, we want them to have a warm blanket and a loving touch."

THS plans to list shelter dogs on petfinder.com and to work with Petco, Walmart and other retailers that host adoption events.

Ideally, new homes can be found right here, Williams says.

THS' long term vision includes a sanctuary where animals that are not adoptable can live out their lives in a loving environment.

Donations can be made now to the Tunica Humane Society, P.O. Box 1064, Tunica, MS 38676. All

donors are then considered members of the society, Williams said.

In addition to the Aug. 11 meeting, county officials have scheduled an Aug. 15 hearing to consider a new animal control ordinance. And in September, an official with the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals will make an assessment visit to Tunica County.

Nationally, according to the ASPCA website, five out of ten dogs in shelters and seven out of ten cats are destroyed simply because there is no one to adopt them. Approximately five to seven million animals enter shelters every year; of those, three to four million are euthanized.

The Tunica Humane Society is starting out "with a box of supplies donated by the Holly Springs Animal Shelter, the five pens at the Jail, and the belief in our hearts that we can make a difference in the way animals are treated," Williams said.

"We are asking the public to not be part of the problem, but to help us be part of the solution."

The Tunica Humane Society is taking a strong stand to keep loyal and loving pets from suffering fates worse than death. And with the help and support of other Tunica Countians, no other dogs will die needlessly and cruelly like June's victim, forsaken by her owners and forgotten by all.