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The Human Face of Shelter Euthanasia

September 7, 2021 Arin Greenwood(https://www.aringreenwood.com/)

This piece is part of HASS's new Voices of Shelter Workers initiative. Please tell us what other stories or features you'd like to see—or participate in—about the experience of working for transformational change from within. Reach out here (https://www.humananimalsupportservices.org/feedback-form/), or comment on our Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/humananimalsupportservices).

Melissa Miller knows what it's like, having to euthanize shelter animals because there simply isn't room for all of them.

At her last job, running a major city shelter, she and her team got the lifesaving rate up from under 10 percent to over 60. But that still left her having to choose 20 pets, several times a week, who wouldn't make it for no other reason than not having a place to go.

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Gem the cat, recovering from a broken jaw at St. Clair County Animal Control in Michigan. Gem's previous owner brought her to the shelter for euthanasia. After an examination, shelter director Melissa Miller and her staff believed Gem could be treated and adopted, instead. In this photo, she is soliciting affection from Melissa, a student worker, and a vet tech. "She's actually quite sweet," Melissa says.

“I looked at every life and every little happy, wiggly, heartworm-positive little guy. And I’m just like, I’m so sorry that I don’t have a cure for you or a family that’s willing to pay for you,” Melissa says. “I don’t want to go back to that.”

Today, Melissa is director of St. Clair County Animal Control (https://www.facebook.com/adoptsccac/) in Michigan. She and her staff, like those around the country, are doing their best to keep pets out of the shelter where possible—giving out pet food and supplies, putting together an eviction toolkit to help people and pets from losing their homes, and more.

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This senior mastiff was having a hard time finding a home, because of his age and medical issues. Bobby Mann asked his media contacts to give him a chance to be on TV. "We went to three different news stations that day and by the third station we both just needed a break," Bobby says. "After our final interview, a family with another senior mastiff called and he found a new brother to spend his golden days with."

And yet the kennels are full. Not just at the St. Clair shelter, but the partner shelters they usually rely on to take in some cats and dogs are full too.

“Sorry, we don’t have room. Sorry, we don’t have room,” Melissa says.

Melissa says her shelter has not been in the position of having to euthanize for space. She’s grateful for that. For many reasons, including that when she thinks about the current residents, they are all—barring one very feisty cat—friendly, healthy, and adoptable. (The feisty cat is being directed into a barn cat program.)

The pets being euthanized now are mostly grievously injured cats, and dogs who have deteriorated after being in kennels for too long. The dogs in this condition start spinning in circles all day; they self-injure; their regular daily lives become unbearable.

Ending their lives is, in a way, euthanizing for space by a different name—with more staff, more resources, more fosters, more adoptions, more pets staying in homes instead of coming into the shelter, more lost pets getting back to their owners, at least some of these animals could be saved, too.

It’s been very hard, on Melissa, the three other staff members who perform the euthanasia procedure, and everyone else who cares for and works with the animals.

“It’s stressful going to sleep every night,” Melissa says.

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Melissa Miller with an abandoned bunny who was taken in by the shelter, and adopted.

Death at shelters used to be the default. In the early 1970s, about 20 million pets entered U.S. animal shelters every year, (https://humanepro.org/page/pets-by-the-numbers) of which an estimated 13.5 million dogs and cats were killed (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5981279/). By 2011, that figure had dropped to 7.2 million pets entering shelters, and 2.6 million of them being euthanized.

Today, the best estimate is that 1.5 million pets are euthanized in U.S. shelters every year, of the 6.5 million who enter (https://www.aspca.org/helping-people-pets/shelter-intake-and-surrender/pet-statistics). We don’t yet have clear data, but it’s believed there was a dip in these numbers in 2020 during year one of the COVID-19 pandemic, when Americans opened their homes to shelter pets in never-before-seen numbers.

This year, shelters appear to be busy again, like they were in 2019. Better than in the more distant past. But busy, and high stakes.

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Laura Welsh with Peppa the dog. "She was people-selective but loved me. She's since been adopted," Laura says.

Laura Welsh, a supervisor at Fort Worth Animal Care & Control in Texas, tells us that this summer is harder than last—especially for staff who started working during the quiet COVID year, then found themselves a year later in a typical Texas summer.

Laura has worked in animal welfare since 2007. In those days, she was euthanizing as many as 50 or 60 animals at a time, during 10-hour shifts. Over the last couple of years, Laura says, her shelter has "completely gotten away from euthanasia lists, per se."

"The majority of the euthanizing we do now is either for extreme behavior or medical, where it's a quality of life issue. So we have come a very, very long way," she says. "However, with that being said, it is summer. It is Texas. We are at 150 percent capacity with nowhere to put incoming animals."

Laura says her shelter has maintained a 95 percent save rate even through these difficult months. But, she says, "Not only do I fear for myself for having to make those decisions, but I don't know how the staff I have now is going to react to that because they've never been exposed to it."

"And I guess the sad part is I've been there and I've done it. So I kind of know how to compartmentalize that and just go on with my day, but I don't know that they would have the ability to do that."

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Indeed, a perhaps unexpected irony of human psychology is that the higher an animal shelter's "live release rate"—the more animals they keep alive—the higher the rates of burnout and compassion fatigue for the people who work there. Texas Tech University doctoral student Allison Andrukonis made this discovery (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08927936.2020.1694316) when studying how live release rates corresponded to shelter workers' mental wellness.

Jennifer Adkins volunteered to perform euthanasia at her first job in part to relieve that burden from her coworkers and in part because she thought she could do it with skill and with minimal suffering. "Well, I can help, and I can be that person that makes sure that this is done correctly and as humanely and compassionately as possible," she says. "I think it's that classic compassion fatigue feeling."

Jennifer had to euthanize cat after cat, day after day. The list was so long, that people working at the shelter called it the "50s list," as in 50 animals to be euthanized per day, though most days it was closer to 10-15, mostly cats.

Jennifer did the job, and pushed for change. She learned about trap-neuter-vaccinate-release programs, and advocated for her shelter to do that instead of killing healthy outdoor cats. She started taking home individual kittens with ringworms, then whole litters, caring for them in a spare bathroom of her house.

When her shelter manager asked why she was doing this, Jennifer said it was because she was tired of killing. All the killing, but especially the feral cats, because there was no need to find them adopters when they could happily live in their outdoor homes, and they were terrified and stressed through the whole euthanasia procedure.

"I want to save more cats, because I'm tired of euthanizing them," she says. "I'm so tired of making

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that decision, and being the one that has to perform it too."

Jennifer began attending animal welfare conferences. She did a Maddie's® apprenticeship (https://www.maddiesfund.org/apprenticeship-program.htm) with American Pets Alive! (https://americanpetsalive.org/maddies-learning-academy) She learned more best practices, more lifesaving tools. She brought them back to her shelter.

"I call that the big awakening for myself, because I saw this whole other world that I just didn't have exposure to before," she says.

Jennifer now works for Best Friends Animal Society, bringing lifesaving tools to shelters across the country. So more animals can live, and fewer shelter workers are faced with 50s lists themselves.

"I think there's a part of me that feels somewhat, I don't know if 'atonement' is the right word, but it helps kind of soothe that trauma from those years that I did have to do this," Jennifer says. "I've been that euthanasia technician, and I don't want that to be anybody else's experience. I want their experience to be better."

Allison has not found a certain explanation for this seeming paradox, but she has some good theories. One is that people who perform fewer euthanasias, are not as skilled at the

procedure.

"Therefore, the time you do it, it's going to be more stressful, which is going to cause the animal to be more stressed and just everything is kind of going to go downhill," Allison says. (https://www.humananimalsupportservices.org)

Another is that people who work at shelters with low rates of euthanasia means they're spending more time interacting with animals and therefore are forming deeper attachments to each one. They may also experience it as "failure" when one of the animals they've worked and developed a bond with is euthanized.

"We need to stop thinking of it as just the killing that's hard, but perhaps just the stress of having a relationship essentially that failed," Allison says.

This picture of Chunk was taken by animal care technician Sam Torres, of Sam Torres Photography.

Melissa was worried, recently, that she was about to have one of those failed relationships.

A dog named Chunk was getting close. He'd been at the shelter for more than six months.

"He was starting to do it with all of the things I was saying, like he was spinning, he was obsessing over his food bowl and biting at water, and doing all sorts of weird things," she says. "And I'm like, all right, if we can't get him out of here in a week, we're going to lose him."

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These are not new concerns. In 1978, the San Diego Reader published an article (https://www.sandiegoreader.com/news/1978/jun/29/cover-down-boy/) about the difficult lives, and mass deaths, of dogs at California shelters—and how tough it could be for the people who worked at the shelters, too.

Aspects of the story seem almost unthinkable now. Some shelter workers refusing to euthanize by injection, preferring instead to use the "Euthanair chamber," a sealed box in which animals were killed by oxygen deprivation. Or, at a time when 60,000 animals were euthanized in the county shelters every year, a litter of puppies being picked through so the cuter ones could be put up for adoption, while those deemed too ugly to find families were euthanized.

But this anecdote will sound distressingly familiar: It's about a dog named Yucon, who'd been in the shelter for months, and was "beginning to show signs of neurosis."

"When we determine mental problems, we put them down. It's not fair to ask an animal to live in a cage situation," in the words of veterinarian Alice DeGroot.

The story goes on to describe, in great and sad detail, Yucon's euthanasia by injection on a shelter table, as DeGroot uttered comforting words. In the end, the dog seemed happy about the attention he was getting, before he died on that table, and was hauled into a bag, then placed in a refrigerator.

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Hazel was one of 20 Labs seized from an unlicensed breeding facility, who came to the St. Clair County shelter. All were adopted within two days. This photo was taken by animal care technician Sam Torres, of Sam Torres Photography.

There's a quote Melissa shares, from Admiral James Stockdale—the Navy pilot who was captured in Vietnam in 1965, and spent 7.5 years as a prisoner of war, being tortured in, and surviving, the infamous "Hanoi Hilton":

"You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be."

"And that's how I feel is that, yes, I have hope otherwise I wouldn't be able to continue in this profession," Melissa says. "But at the same point, I have to face the circumstances that I'm in right now and deal with these directly. And they're very difficult circumstances. And it doesn't mean it's always going to be this way, but it is this way right now."

Today, Melissa isn't worried her shelter will be forced back into mass euthanasia of the past. There will be no picking through puppies to separate the cute ones who live, from the rest.

But the situation with the dogs like Chunk who are deteriorating in a crowded shelter, just like Yucon did those four decades ago, is hard. It's hard on the pets. It's hard on the staff.

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"We face an exhausted workforce as we are constantly at or just over capacity and we're understaffed," she says. "I worry about the long term effects of compassion fatigue and burnout on my staff."

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There is a way out of at least some of this. It's by shifting animal services away from impounding animals in the shelters where they deteriorate, and toward a community-based model so they can stay in homes where they'll thrive.

"Support families and pets to stay together," Melissa says.

A lot of dedicated people are working toward that future. We heard from many of them when we put out a call, almost two months ago, for stories about what it is like being someone who loves animals, and has had to end their lives, working in a shelter.

We heard so many moving, heartbreaking, inspiring stories we couldn't include them all in this first piece—please stay tuned for more, and get in touch (https://www.humananimalsupportservices.org/feedback-form/) if you have a story to share.

It took Kasper two months before he'd let Lauren touch him.

Lauren is now director of Metro Nashville Animal Care and Control—a very busy government shelter with "save rates" regularly over 90 percent

(https://www.nashville.gov/departments/health/animal-care-and-control/data-reports)—described the feeling of trying so hard to protect the animals and her staff with what are by definition limited resources.

"We're in the same position probably that everybody else is," Lauren says. "I try really hard to be optimistic…I think that a lot of shelter staff and shelter management, we're being asked to perform miracles, right?"

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> Lauren told us about the first dog she ever euthanized, back two decades ago, at a shelter in Illinois. Charlie was a big dog, who'd been given to the shelter after reportedly biting someone. His family brought him in with his favorite toy, a white plastic hotdog. Lauren still keeps that toy today, in a basket with the collars and other items she's held onto from her own pets.
>
> "That was my first euthanasia. I don't take that lightly at all. It had a very, very heavy impact on me," Lauren said.

Bobby Mann, now the Maddie's Human Animal Support Services Pilot Director at American Pets Alive!, told us about finding motivation in the death he saw and participated in at a California shelter where on his very first day of work, he was instructed to walk dozens of dogs to the euthanasia room, and hold them through the procedure.

"And then we would put them on a cart and we would drag them to the freezer," Bobby says. "And then we'd go back to do the same thing until the list is done. And so that's how I was first exposed to euthanasia in animal shelters."

"That kitten is my spirit animal!" Bobby says. "His name was Looney and I think his face gave Grumpy Cat a run for his money."

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Bobby accepted the pets who were being surrendered. He recalls kids in tears begging him not to take their dogs. He'd make promises to the people, and the animals, he couldn't always keep.

"It was my job to keep you safe and I could not do it. And then I also have to be there to put you down," he says, as if speaking to those pets themselves.

Bobby left that job—he was fired after regular conflict with the shelter's director, he says—and threw himself into "the restorative level of the work."

Manny "Manatee" at his foster home "where he is just blossoming (and losing weight!)," Melissa Miller says.

He started a humane education nonprofit. He wrote memoirs of some of the dogs he'd euthanized. He shared them with the new director of a different California shelter, where she was turning things around. He joined her team, and their shelter became a model for innovation, best practices, and lifesaving (https://sacramentocityexpress.com/2019/10/01/front-street-animal-shelter-manager-

retires-leaves-legacy-of-improvements/).

Now Bobby helps other shelters all over the country do the same, by reimagining the role of animal services (https://www.humananimalsupportservices.org/about/elements-of-hass/), expanding inclusivity in the industry, and bringing compassion and empathy to the people who are still in the position of walking dogs through the shelter into the euthanasia room.

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“Things used to be worse—we can’t and won’t go back to that —but we can still do better for animals, communities, and shelter staff,” Bobby says. “Sustainable change takes time, and that’s what we’re working toward. As a movement, we must provide extra love and compassion to the under-resourced shelter staff who still face a big uphill battle.”

This photo of Chunk was taken by animal care technician Sam Torres, of Sam Torres Photography.

There are the uphill battles, and there are the victories that sustain along the way.

There is Chunk.

Melissa called the new director of her old shelter, and asked if she could send Chunk there for an adoption event, just to see if maybe a new set of potential adopters would see something in him that her adopters had not.

She promised to take Chunk back if he didn't get adopted.

He got adopted.

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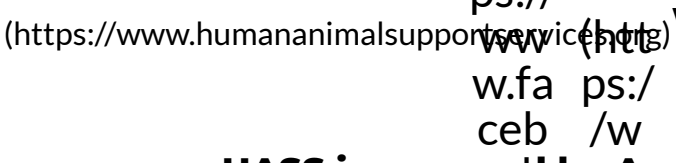

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