

Protectors of People and Pets

Nonprofit provides a safe haven for pets as well as victims

by John Osborne

OFTENTIMES, DOGS ARE A WOMAN'S BEST friend, too. Sometimes their only friend.

In that spirit, The Shelter for Abused Women & Children in Naples allows victims of domestic violence to bring their pets along to provide emotional support and ensure the safety of the animals themselves, said residential supervisor Carol Drouin, who's worked at the shelter for the past 18 years.

In fact, Drouin said, the shelter encourages it.

"Accepting pets is important because all members of the family unit deserve respect and a lot of pets are also subjected to cruelty and abuse," she said. "A lot of times, abusing an animal is just another form of control for the abuser."

And such a sad fact of life could wind up putting a domestic violence victim between a rock and a hard place, Drouin said.

"When I started working at the shelter in 1996, women would call for shelter for themselves, their children and their pets," she said. "We were unable to accept pets at the time (so) survivors would not come to the shelter and would either opt to stay in their home to protect their animals or live in their cars — if they had one. Either way, this was dangerous (and) this is what led us to opening a kennel in our new facility. This gives survivors the opportunity to come and not have to leave their beloved pet behind."

Since the kennel's opening, Drouin said the shelter has hosted dogs, cats, chinchillas, rabbits, lizards, bearded dragons, fish, birds, guinea pigs and snakes.

At the moment, it's providing safe haven for 21 adults, 24 children and five dogs, including "Angel," a 4-month-old boxer-terrier mix who's quick to make friends with humans (especially children) and even quicker with unlimited pink-tongued kisses.

"She's just an absolutely beautiful baby girl," Drouin said while cradling Angel in her arms and receiving a face full of doggy smutches in return.

Drouin said Angel came to the shelter with her owner due to the fact that her home's abuser targeted the puppy as a way to control Angel's owner and get the woman to "obey."

"Our survivor told us in our initial assessment that the puppy had been left outside overnight tied on a short rope to a tree," Drouin said. "The abuser had kicked the little pup and would withhold food as a means of punishment."

After Angel and her owner had been admitted to the shelter, Drouin said, "our new puppy appeared lethargic and had cuts on her legs. The next day, our veterinarian came in to check on her. Luckily, she did not have anything life-threatening and was treated for her existing problems."

While Angel's wounds were being attended to, Drouin said the dog's owner was able to move into an apartment at the shelter.

"Keeping pets and their owners together brings normalcy to families, and what we also see is that animals are therapeutic to their owners and others," Drouin said. "Pets bring joy, and it's documented that petting an animal leads to a drop in blood pressure."

It's exactly those sorts of benefits that have led the New York City-based AKC Humane Fund to fund the animal program in Naples and at similar shelters around the country, said AKC Humane Fund Vice President Gina DiNardo.

"The women's shelter grant program is something we're very proud of at AKC Humane Fund," DiNardo said. "Dogs are our passion, and as any pet owner will tell you, that animal becomes part of the family. It's also been documented that nearly half of abused



A staff member at the Shelter for Abused Women and Children in Naples holds Angel, a 4-month-old boxer-terrier mix that recently came to the shelter with her family. The facility is one of very few that allows domestic violence victims to bring their pets along with them. **photo** Laura Torres

women with pets delayed leaving an abusive situation because of concern for their pet's life."

So, DiNardo continued, keeping pets and their owners together makes perfect sense.

"We know that women entering domestic violence shelters are facing extremely difficult life issues, and leaving their pet behind shouldn't be one of them," she said. "That is why we feel these grants are so important: we're able to help a shelter provide for these animals and give some peace of mind to domestic abuse victims."

But it's not just women being served at the shelter, Drouin said, since domestic violence isn't a one-way gender street.

"We actually get quite a few men as well," she said. "And we do have repeat residents, too, since it takes the average person seven times to leave an abuser."

No matter how many times it takes, however, Drouin said help would always be available to domestic violence victims and their pets at The Shelter for Abused Women & Children.

"We do not limit the number of times someone can enter shelter," she said. "Sometimes residents come back having the same abuser, or they find themselves in another abusive relationship." **TJ**

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