

BEST NONPROFIT/CHARITABLE ORGANIZATION

SONOMA HUMANE SOCIETY

By Alexandra Russell

There's no such thing as a "quick tour" of the Sonoma Humane Society (SHS), because the 33,000-square-foot facility serves myriad purposes. Of course, there are animal rescue and adoption services, plus a full-service veterinary hospital and a reduced rate spay/neuter clinic (subsidized, in large part, by a grant from Sonoma Community Foundation). Perhaps less known are the planned and emergency boarding facilities, professional grooming salon, training classes, gift shop, lending library and youth socialization therapy and mentorship programs.

Located on close to nine acres on Highway 12 (at the western edge of Santa Rosa), SHS has plenty of room to house all these services—though most visitors don't realize the extent of what's going on. Take, for example, Forget Me Not Farm, a permanent home to a variety of domestic and exotic livestock and poultry, which welcomes more than 450 at-risk children visitors each year. Working with 15 local agencies and group homes, Farm Director Carol Rathmann explains, "We teach kids who are at risk of perpetuating violent behavior how to respond and react appropriately. Slowly, over time, they begin to establish ongoing relationships with the animals. They learn what it's like to work for and establish mutual trust."

An onsite "therapy garden" provides the children with nutritious, fresh produce, and plans are underway to expand plantings (under the tutelage of a local organic farmer) and perhaps supply produce to other local "healthy living" nonprofits. "We have about 10,000 visitors every year to the adoption center, hospital



Dr. Leach performs a pre-surgical exam on a cat at one of the nonprofit's low cost spay and neuter clinics. (Photo by Sumner Fowler)

and training center...plus our volunteers," explains Rathmann. "Perhaps one day, we'll be able to offer them fresh farm products."

It's this type of innovative thinking and collaborative community support that lets SHS offer such a diverse array of services. SHS gets no funding from the state or county, nor is it connected to any larger animal rescue organization. "The Humane Society of the United States and the ASPCA are great organizations, but we aren't affiliated with them," says Kiska Icard, who became executive director at SHS two years ago. "When people make donations to support those organizations, that money leaves the county. The only way to support SHS is to make a direct donation. We are the local Humane Society, and the work we do is supported through fund-raising, donations and the profits from our fee-for-service businesses."

"We have about 7,500 active donors in the community, and the majority of them give \$20 to \$25 per year. Every single one of them makes a huge difference," says Development Director Cindy Roach. "You'd be surprised how far a donation of \$25 can go here."

Just as it's dependent on community dollars, SHS also relies on hundreds of local volunteers to care for the more than 2,000 animals it welcomes each year. From manning the gift shop to socializing (walking, petting, playing with) animals to in-home fostering, you'll find volunteers in every part of the organization. "Many are business professionals, who love animals and want to use their expertise as well as their heart," says Icard. "Whether or not someone is in the market to adopt a pet, if you love animals, there are ways to support us."

It's this strong support that's let SHS become an innovator in animal rescue and adoption, including programs like designated guardianship (name SHS as your pet's caretaker in your will), fospice (fostering elderly or terminal animals) and FIV adoption (known as "cat AIDS," this contagious but manageable disease is not a threat to humans). "The community has embraced this organization," says Icard. "We keep pushing the envelope as far as what we consider 'adoptable,' and I've been so amazed by the community's willingness to participate."

Amazed and grateful. "I want to thank *NorthBay biz* readers for giving recognition that we're doing some really good work on behalf of the animals," says Icard. "These animals don't have a voice. They can't say thank you, so we'll say it for them." ■



A teen girl who attended one of the youth summer camps is shown helping with one of the tiny kittens during kitten season.



www.sonomahumane.org