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Portrait of a Dog Lady

She loves hounds passionately enough to kill them
By Melissa Levine

You love your dog, right? Kiss it on the lips? If you do, you're far from alone. In recent years, much has been made of America's increasing, and increasingly expensive, obsession with dogs. Critics have pointed to the signifiers -- plush doggy boutiques, bark mitzvahs, canines on Prozac -- and chastised us for our sins. But we're not ashamed. We love our dogs.

Well, maybe. Even with a dog-obsessed culture and the rise of "pro-dog" politics, shelters across the United States are crammed to bursting. Every year, roughly 5 million dogs are surrendered to shelters, and only a fourth of these find new homes. What happens to the rest? More and more, with the rise of the no-kill movement, they live out their lives behind bars. Condemned to chain-link cages, concrete floors, and ceaseless stimulation from other dogs, many long-term shelter residents deteriorate into disturbed aggressors, baring their teeth at even the kindest visitor.

But not at Rondout. Owned and run by Sue Sternberg, a passionate voice for dog welfare, Rondout Valley Kennels (in rural New York state) retains euthanasia as a viable, humane option for dogs that are too aggressive or sick to make good pets. The result is a conscientious process of determination that begins when a dog first enters the shelter and doesn't end until it's either adopted or put down. *Shelter Dogs*, a riveting documentary from director Cynthia Wade, bears witness every step of the way.

Though *Shelter Dogs* portrays a woman who is firmly located on one side of the euthanize/no-kill debate, it's neither a polemic nor a comprehensive examination of the controversy. Instead, it's the story of a committed, compassionate woman who feels called to do a very particular kind of work and whose daily life, because of this work, is fraught with loaded ethical questions and life-and-death judgments. Almost as soon as Sternberg and her staff have braved a decision on a troubled dog, another one barks its way through the door, and the team begins again, weighing the pros and cons.

Shelter Dogs is particularly good at conveying the drama of everyday procedure at Rondout. Wade chooses four dogs in particular -- loping Fred, sweet but unpredictable Ginger, protective Beau, and angelic Agnes -- and involves the viewer in owner interviews, temperament tests, and personal time with the dogs. Add to these sights the emotionally charged staff debates, which provide some of the most compelling scenes in the film, and we get a sharply drawn picture of fervent, ongoing engagement with difficult issues.

Sue Sternberg has a magnetic presence. She is a woman obviously and overwhelmingly in love, connected with dogs in the profound reaches of her heart. As a child, she learned every breed and read every dog book in the library; as an adult, she is dedicated to dogs -- to the practical exclusion of anything else. "I'm closer to my own dogs than I am to any other human," she says. "I don't know how everything would be if I didn't have my dogs."

In jeans and sweats, Sternberg is earthy and disheveled, with clear eyes and a measured voice. She has served in nearly every capacity in the dog world -- animal control officer, behavioral consultant, trainer -- and has developed a temperament test now used nationally to determine the extent of aggression in a dog's personality. But perhaps what is most remarkable about Sternberg is her utter lack of pretense. She is blazingly, brutally honest. When a new mother brings in a dog that has behaved aggressively around the baby, Sternberg advises her to surrender the hound to the shelter. In fact, she tells the owner that there is no other choice; the pup is not safe for the child. Then Sternberg looks at the dog and says, "It's going to be like putting her in a torture chamber."

Such stark necessity is all too common in Sternberg's world -- but fortunately for us and for the movie, it's not all as bleak as that. Of the four dogs that Wade follows, two find happy homes, regaining the springy joy they'd temporarily lost. (As one prospective owner walks Ginger, Sternberg and her staff peer through the windows, flushed and hopeful, like parents spying on a teen's first date.) During an adoption, the mood is giddy, and -- as much as it aggravates the burden of overpopulation -- Rondout welcomes the birth of puppies with all the requisite delight.

When Sternberg does put a dog down, she does not do it lightly. She showers the pup with affection, gives herself over to its comfort, and even offers it a final pleasure -- in this case, fried chicken nuggets from McDonald's. Whatever your opinion of euthanasia, it's hard to argue with the mercy of this final meal.

In the face of death, as elsewhere in her life, Sternberg is humble. After she has had an aggressive dog put down, she wonders about her own mortality. When she's in purgatory, she asks, how will she be viewed? "What if all the dogs I made decisions on were there? Where would they want me to go?" It's moving as well as funny: Sternberg really does believe in the dogs. To her, there may be nothing more valuable.

In the dog world, the film will have its proponents and its detractors; Sternberg is a controversial figure. But as a movie, it is a tight and artful work, as much about the passion of one person and the ethical choices she makes as it is about the politics of sheltering. For this reason alone, it's worth your time -- even if you have to get a pet sitter.

Heidi Gutman



Heaven With Hounds: Sue Sternberg, who runs Rondout Valley Kennels in New York, with her own dogs.

Details

Who / What:
Shelter Dogs
Film Director:
Cynthia Wade
Details:
Featuring Sue Sternberg

Opens Friday
Where:
The Roxie and the Rafael