



# gimme shelter

## training wheels

by Sue Sternberg

*Editor's Note: In this issue, Sue tells an inspiring story about a new model of active community outreach. Outreach, no matter what form it takes, is a great way for trainer to get involved in animal sheltering and care.*

A local man who had just lost his trailer home in a fire came to my shelter to surrender a dog. Now homeless, the man had to move in with his father and couldn't take his pet with him. The dog, a six-year-old English Setter named Moose, had been kept on a 20-foot chain his entire life.

Moose presented as most affectionate, social, gentle, and loving dog. He had obviously never been abused and he had a wonderful, wonderful temperament. But he was not neutered, had never been indoors, had never been to a vet, had never been vaccinated or tested for heartworm, and had been sunburned on his nose over and over again.

And yet this owner clearly loved his dog and proudly donated Moose's chain, telling me how every Thanksgiving he would bring a plate of turkey and fixings out to Moose, how he never hit Moose, how if Moose ever needed discipline he would just roll open the window of his

trailer and yell, "Moose, quiet!" and Moose would shut right up, and how he hoped we could find Moose a good new home.

The man was genuinely loving and kind, I realized, but from a completely different world of dog ownership than I knew and from a very different financial position. He had raised this dog the only way he knew -- just like his father had raised dogs before him. The man signed his dog over to us, we shook hands, and he was invited to call to check up on Moose. After a bath, a health check-up, heartworm testing (negative!), and vaccines, we placed Moose with a new family where he easily adjusted to living primarily as an indoor dog.

Moose's story had a happy ending, but I couldn't help but think about all the "what ifs":

- What if I could have had Moose surrendered five years earlier so he didn't have to spend most of his life outside on a chain?
- What if I could have found this nice man earlier in Moose's life and, over time, gently talked about bringing Moose indoors ... at first at night and then, as his behavior proved to be exemplary, more permanently?
- What if I could have offered

low-cost, minimal vet care, and at least had the dog on heartworm preventative?

I was reminded from my exposure to Moose and his owner that it's easy to judge people who keep their dogs chained up ... until you begin to understand their reasons, beliefs, and lack of education about animals.

I began to envision a van that would travel around our county, down the back roads, going door to door, kind of like a Good Humor Ice Cream truck for pets. We'd outfit the truck with experienced volunteers with excellent people skills, along with supplies such as dog and cat collars, instant ID tags, rawhides, Milk-Bone biscuits, cable runners (to replace chains, at first), non-tip water bowls, educational materials, spay/neuter subsidies, and good intentions.

Our goal was to bring the shelter to the community, instead of waiting for people to bring their animals to the shelter. We wanted answers to a lot of burning questions:

- Why were dogs being chained outside, and what we could we do to help incorporate them into the households.

- Could we intervene early enough in the lifeline of a behavior problem so that the puppy/dog wouldn't end up chained outside, or relegated to an outside pen.
- Was it possible to interrupt the cycle of overpopulation by spaying a female before she became pregnant, instead of taking in her litter of pups at the shelter?

Thanks to donations of supplies and funding from Honey Loring and the campers at Camp Gone to The Dogs in Putney, Vermont, we began a pilot program called "Training Wheels." It seemed like a good idea, but would it work? Or would we be humming the theme song to *Deliverance* while keeping an eye out for stray bullets?!

It was the most amazing summer I have had in a shelter (and I have worked in shelters since I was 18). Accompanied by local dog trainer/behavior consultant and long-time shelter worker and volunteer Jane Kopelman, we traveled the county in my kennel van, outfitted with two bright yellow banners that displayed our logo, phone number, and the slogan "Training Wheels, Keeping You and Your Pet on the Road to Success ... Free Training! Free Advice!"

Jane and I, along with some area volunteer trainers and some of my shelter staff rode around and began meeting pet owners in our neighborhoods. Everyone initially greeted us with suspicion and defensiveness until we came out of the van bearing gifts.

"Would you like a new collar and

an instant reflector ID tag for your dog/cat?" we would ask. Then we would begin a conversation about the pet. Our genuine, nonjudgmental interest in their dog or cat immediately helped them relax and share some of the details and questions we all have regarding the care of our animals. We would pull out treats, and bring, bang, boon, get their dog to lie down on a hand signal or sit instead of jumping up.

We pulled up to one trailer park as a shirtless young guy was hauling black Shepherd by the collar away from a three-foot chain and into a trailer. We approached with a bright red box of Milk-Bone biscuits, a brand new turquoise collar, and a giant rawhide bone. We announce we were with "Training Wheels", a new program from the Rondout Valley Kennels that brings donated gifts for local pets, and might his Shepherd enjoy a new bone or some biscuits?

The man came toward us, accepting the gifts warily. I told him about the program and we began talking about German Shepherd. He said that he had gotten his dog about a year earlier from a neighbor who didn't want it any longer and was going to kill it if he couldn't give it away. This dog, who was 6 years old, was the best dog this man had ever had and actually was more his 13-year-old son's dog. His son, who has cystic fibrosis, just loves animals.

The man explained how they kept the dog chained up when he's outside because of the town's leash law and, also, to keep him

from getting hit by a car. I asked the man if he could use a cable runner instead of the chain, and we all looked at the space between his trailer and his shed and realize it was the perfect length for a cable runner. He looked me right in the eye and said that he would love to have the runner and that he had always wanted on, but he couldn't afford it. (And I believed him. I paid for the four I had in the van, and they weren't cheap!)

I ran to the van, grabbed a cable runner, and gave it to the man. He asked if he could pay me something. I declined and said it had been donated to us and was now being donated to someone who needed it. We pulled away and, while still in the driveway, we could see through the rearview mirror that he was already hammering and attaching the cable runner.

Every visit we made that summer was just as dramatic and fulfilling. I believe that every person we greeted from the van felt a whole new way about their local shelter and would and could turn to us for advice, surrender, training, and behavioral help.

*Sue Sternberg is a lecturer, shelter owner, trainer, and creator of the infamous "Assess-A-Hand." For more information about starting a Training Wheels program in your area, contact Rondout Valley Kennel, 4628 Route 209, Accord, NY 12404 or Suecarmen@aol.com.*