

A WEEK IN LOUISIANA by Lesli Hyland

On Oct 3rd myself and 6 other animal advocates, including Tom Browe, former RCHS Executive Director, flew down to Louisiana to help with the animal rescue effort after hurricane Katrina. We were asked to work with the Louisiana SPCA at a temporary shelter area in St Bernard Parish. Two huge tents were set up in a ball field called Rebel Field to house dogs, cats and miscellaneous other pets. Volunteers pitched tents themselves or lived in RVs on the same grounds.

Having done shelter work for many years I knew what I would be facing. Noise, fear, chaos and emotional ups and downs always accompany work with animals in crisis. What I was not prepared for was the enormity of the animal problem and the overall sense of loss that seemed to hang in the air like a curtain. This ball field where children used to play was now covered with a layer of toxic sludge, the result of receding flood water. A black crust covered the grass. The neighborhoods surrounding the area were completely destroyed. Tattered houses sat in the middle of roads...cars rested on top of garages... belongings, reduced to rubble littered the ground...No one would be living here for a long, long time. The animals left behind by their owners and stray animals already living on the streets were competing to survive in this post-Katrina waste land. The SPCA's goal was to collect as many of these animals as possible. They were captured by hand, rescued from homes and humanely trapped by the hundreds and brought to Rebel field. Approximately 500 animals were brought in during the week I was there. Upon arrival they were examined, vaccinated, micro chipped, fed, stabilized, and loved by volunteers from all walks of life and all parts of the country. They were then transported to various shelters for long term housing. Careful records were kept and pictures of the pets were posted on the internet in the hope that an owner would be searching. Everyone hoped that as more people got settled into their new lives they would be able to reclaim their pets. Because of this hope the animals are being held in foster care for as long as possible.

While I was in Louisiana I met some unforgettable people and animals. Here are just a few:

Bobby, a fireman from NYC, worked day and night bringing in animals from the streets. He had no formal animal handling training, but he had a certain quality that the animals trusted, allowing him to capture even the most elusive.

The "odd couple" - a huge Great Dane and a tiny Dachshund became friends on the streets. The Dane almost certainly provided protection, but the Dachshund had only companionship to offer. They were inseparable and went to a foster home together.

Dr. Nancy, a vet from Idaho, after a grueling 14 hour work day went the extra mile to take a not so friendly, frantic, frightened Black Lab into her vehicle to sleep with her so that he wouldn't hurt himself trying to get out of his crate at night.

Mama dog, a shepherd mix, arrived at the shelter a walking skeleton because what little nourishment she could find on the streets had gone into milk for her puppies.

Terry, a dentist, after being bitten seriously on the calf by a feral cat, was still at my side wanting to help work with the aggressive dogs because they needed attention more than the friendly dogs who could be walked by any of the volunteers.

Dapple, a Dachshund mix, was a true survivor - proud and defiant. She did not allow herself to be approached by very many people, often throwing herself at the front of her cage with teeth flashing! She did not tolerate petting and would sit with her back to you on a leash as if to say, "I don't need you or anyone". One day as we sat in companionable silence she moved closer to me and sat on my foot. It was a gesture of friendship and I accepted it on her terms.

Buddy, a tri-colored Beagle, was the first dog I touched when I arrived. He leaned into me and rested his head on my lap. I found myself seeking him out in times of sadness and as the week went on I noticed other people doing the same. Buddy was very good at making people feel better. I hope we did the same for him.