

## Common Ground in the Ever-Changing Landscape of Animal Welfare

Britney Wallesch

A couple of years ago I had the great fortune to meet a dog we called Jessi. She had amazing flying-nun ears and a distinctive not-quite-black color. She was sweet, she was busy, she was playful and funny, and she was very dangerous.

Who knows what life events Jessi had endured in her short time prior to coming to us. Whatever they were, the damage done to her was already deep and would prove to be everlasting. She was reactive toward other dogs and prone to aggressive outbursts. She was at turns equally fearful of and aggressive towards people and would sometimes charge at them, hackles raised and teeth bared.

She and I attended public events with the rest of our adoption team in a fruitless effort to help her become accustomed to public situations without going over threshold and making a scene. In the meantime, we looked everywhere for help. We contacted other rescue groups and shelters with renowned behavior programs. None of them could offer her a spot in their program. We called national sanctuaries and were told that dogs who could not get along with others were not good candidates for sanctuary rehabilitation. We read hundreds of pages of training and behavior modification books and tried our best to implement them with her.

Eventually, after more than a year as a foster dog in our home, Jessi seemed to turn a corner all on her own. Something finally seemed to give and Jessi began to look like a dog that someone might actually be able to adopt. And one day a few months later, someone did.

But this story isn't one of those that tells how the perseverance of the no-kill philosophy actually worked for her, and how an organization deeply committed to the idea that every dog can be saved made a miraculous turn around in a troubled dog and helped her find her happily ever after. Jessi's story doesn't end this way because, 6 months after she was adopted, Jessi turned on her companion dog and very nearly mauled him to death. Understandably, Jessi's family was traumatized, hurt, and afraid. They couldn't bring themselves to bring her home with them again. Six months after she was adopted, and probably many, many months after I should have done it in the first place, I took Jessi myself and had her put to sleep. I held her precious body in my arms and let her lick my face and bid her, this dog I loved and who I could not save, goodbye.

### **Reevaluating It All**

In the weeks that followed, my career in animal welfare very nearly came to an end. Not only was the loss of Jessi and the ultimate finality of her death a soul-crushing experience, the decision to end her life in this way made me seriously begin to question my own belief system.

I've euthanized dogs before and the definition of no-kill I've subscribed to allowed me to do so as long as the dog was sick or injured beyond hope of recovery, or vicious as to the point of being unsafe for the public. I could hide behind this defense for Jessi's death, and many people would support that decision. But I still had to ask myself "Did I really do everything that could be done for her?" "If I could have gotten her to someone better, more experienced, with more resources, could she have been rehabilitated?"

And many months later, when the panic attacks subsided and I no longer had to pull the car to the side of the road when the grief over her loss threatened to overtake me completely, I asked myself these questions. "How many other dogs died while I fought for those 18 months to save Jessi?" "Would it have been fair to any other organization, or to her, to transfer her just for the sake of letting someone else try to figure it out?" "What if I had actually quit, and walked away after this, what would happen to all the people and animals I might still help?" "How many others like me did walk away, and how many animals have suffered a needless death because they did?"

Did I back myself into a corner by subscribing to an organizational philosophy that prevented me from seeing the truth of our limitations? Was my judgment over her care clouded by questions about what people might think of me, or the organization I worked so hard to build, when a long-stay dog winds up dead in the end? Could I look my colleagues in the eye at a conference and confidently tell them "BDAR is no-kill, we only euthanize in the most extreme of circumstances." What if Jessi's issues weren't so extreme to them?

There's a dark side to the black-and-white picture of animal sheltering that the no-kill movement subscribes to. It has essentially drawn a line in the sand, putting those who believe in it on one side, and those who do not on the other. That in itself is problematic enough as an industry built around a daily struggle to care for, find homes for, and stem the tide of incoming unwanted animals certainly has enough to worry about without having to face off across a philosophical divide with would-be partners in that life-saving mission.

In my opinion, we would be far better off as an industry to cease labeling ourselves, and instead focus on the ways in which we can support like-minded organizations who strive to meet industry best practices within the scope and realities of their respective capabilities.

### **Philosophical Differences?**

There are no shortages of blog posts, websites, and informational materials available to understand the fundamental parameters of the no-kill movement. In its most accepted version, the definition of no-kill means that an agency, organization, or community achieves a collective live release rate greater than 90%. Even the movement itself makes room for the death of animals who are sick or injured beyond help, or who are too dangerous to be responsibly adopted to the public.

At its face value, that seems pretty straightforward. In practice, not so much. This is because the term used to identify this “save 90% or more of them” movement is in itself misleading. How can you be no-kill, but still kill? Advocates will tell you it’s not killing, it’s humane euthanasia, a relief of suffering or ultimately the very last resort for an animal who cannot be rehabilitated. Guess what? Other shelters will actually tell you the same thing. No-kill advocates will tell you that all of them can be saved. They’ll rally you around that paradigm and make it the clear call to action for all would-be progressive shelter workers. But, as my co-worker points out, those rallying cries come with a disclaimer, an asterisk.

Everyone can be no-kill! All of the animals can be saved! \*

\* Exceptions can be made for the 10% or fewer animals who are deemed non-rehabilitatable.

At its core, the no-kill movement is based on the fundamental philosophy that every single life entrusted to the care of the sheltering organization is precious beyond replacement, and that every possible effort to ensure a live outcome for that animal be pursued.

This philosophy is why the movement has been so successful. It’s largely contributed to the fact that 10 million fewer animals are dying in shelters every year in the US than were 25 years ago. When the first leaders of the no-kill movement began to take a hard look at standard shelter practices and realized all of the ways things could be improved it was a radical, transformative look at the accepted operations of a long-standing industry. And it brought the issue of homeless pets, previously shrouded in misery and hopelessness, into a new light. In other words, the no-kill movement has largely helped shape the current landscape of the animal welfare industry.

At BDAR, we work with a lot of animal shelters. Since our rescue doesn’t accept privately surrendered pets, we have to create partnerships with shelters to help them where they need help. Sure, there are still a great many shelters out there who have quite a lot of catching up to do in order to bring their operations into the 21st century, but this is not about those shelters (their numbers are increasingly diminishing anyway). This is about the other shelters, the ones we work with that are not no-kill.

Here’s the thing I’ve learned along the way about these shelters. Their boards, staff, and volunteers operate on the guiding principle that every single life entrusted to their care is precious beyond replacement, and that every possible effort to ensure a live outcome for those animals should be pursued. These progressive, modern-day shelters are doing everything in their power and within their means to pursue proven life-saving programs.

Is it possible that, no-kill or not, we as an industry are actually on the same page? Are we talking about the same things? Do we believe in the power of the same programs, in harnessing the compassion and responsibility of the communities we serve, in the ability to do

more good as a collective whole than as component parts, and in the moral responsibility to care for each animal as an individual?

In fact, we do, and the reason we're failing to recognize it is based largely on our insistent use of foregone labels.

### **Live Release Rate Isn't Enough**

The question of modern day, progressive animal sheltering should no longer be one of simple live -release percentages (i.e. 90% live release or not, no-kill or not), but rather one of organizational effectiveness, program implementation, and community involvement.

In Roger Haston's recent presentation through the Society of Animal Welfare Administrators "Beyond Labels: Understanding the True Impact of Live release Rates and Intake Policies" (2014), animal sheltering agencies (including rescue groups and other non-traditional intake and adoption organizations) can effectively predict the long term success of their programs based solely on intake and outcome numbers and on the policies surrounding the organization's operations. The model shows that over time, organizations who refuse to euthanize at all costs are likely to significantly diminish in effectiveness, oftentimes creating catastrophic organizational consequences. Moreover, organizations with selective intake frequently and inadvertently redirect the most problematic or challenging of animals to other organizations within their communities who have no choice but to admit every animal who comes in the door.

Haston's work presents an intriguing question related to the effectiveness of an organization based solely on live release rate. In many communities, if organization A saves 10 dogs per year and euthanizes 1, they are technically no-kill and may be lauded as a highly effective organization with high standards of care and sufficient levels of concern for their animals. But if organization B takes in 2000 animals per year and euthanizes 300 of them, its LRR is only 85%. The shelter is not no-kill and is therefore subject to intense public criticism and scrutiny, as well as disdain and dismissal from group A.

How does this make any sense?

In defense of group A, however, they too are subject to a fair amount of toxic perceptions. It is likely group A has significantly fewer financial, material, and human resources than the larger organization in the community. Groups like this tend to run on an all-volunteer basis, or with a minimal staff. They are frequently not supported by any government contracts and may not qualify for larger funding sources due to decreased visibility and capacity to help. Often, their donor pool is much smaller and they may be unable to attract high-dollar donors from the community. They frequently are criticized by organization B for being limited admission, selective about the animals they help, and overly idealistic about the fate of so many homeless pets. They have to compete with organization B's visibility, budget, and community support.

What A and B fail to recognize in each other, and therefore fail completely to portray to the public they serve, is that both are, in fact, working to save unwanted pets. They are doing the work within the confines of their respective capabilities. If both organizations are responsible, adhere to their mission, and make adoptable animals available to the public in place of those acquired from other sources, then both are assisting in the best way they can to achieve the higher goals of helping homeless pets find homes.

It is only to the detriment of both that they choose to view each other as opponents in the ultimate achievement of that goal.

### Common Ground

The operational nuances of every organization are impossible for anyone outside of that organization to always understand. Any organization that repeatedly demonstrates a commitment to bettering the lives of the people and pets they serve, that adheres to the basic tenants of animal sheltering by way of the 5 Freedoms, that can inspire others to choose adoption, choose to spay and neuter, choose to donate or volunteer their time, deserves the respect of its peers. Whether that organization is an open admission facility serving thousands of animals every year with a LRR that is less than 90%, or it's a small rescue group, we are all doing our part.

It is clear that animal sheltering as an industry has evolved into something far more compassionate and capable than what it was some 25 or more years ago. Regardless of each organization's intake policies, adoption criteria, or the threshold they set to establish how far, how long, and for how much money they are willing to go for an individual animal, it is neither productive nor wise for those of us outside of that organization to judge. None of us can help the other with all of the other's problem animals. None of us can understand the intricacies of the relationships we have with our staff, volunteers, foster families, and adopters.

What we can control is the public's understanding of what constitutes an effective organization. We can collectively turn public scrutiny to organizations who do not consider the 5 Freedoms, who do not make adoptable animals available to the public, and who do not consider the safety of the public when releasing animals. We can, together, agree on minimum standards and do everything in our collective power to drive public support to organizations who meet them. We can unite for public policies that will make our communities safer for pets and people, and that will discourage or eliminate cruelty and neglect. We can clearly see the large grey area between no-kill and not, and begin to eliminate the barriers to collaborations, partnerships, and the achievement of mutual goals as a result.

Modern-day animal sheltering is no longer a black and white question of whether euthanasia occurs or not. Rather, it is a dynamic, evolving, and complex process complicated by the fact that neither people nor animals are always predictable nor consistent. For the sake

of moving onward and ever upward in our collective vision of a time when there are no more abandoned, neglected, abused, or homeless animals - we must recognize the time for labels has come and gone. We are, simply, in it together.