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Unwanted no more

Sanctuary saves unadoptable dogs, cats from euthanasia

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Star Prairie - Chako isn't the kind of dog that's likely to find a home through the local animal shelter.

An aging Siberian husky, incontinent and partially paralyzed, he needs round-the-clock care that his owner, widowed, and with arthritis herself, can no longer manage.

But Chako has a home, along with dozens of other aged or maimed or once-abandoned animals, on a 40-acre spread along the Apple River in western Wisconsin.

Chako lives at the Home for Life Sanctuary near Star Prairie, the final residence for an eclectic menagerie of dogs, cats, bunnies, birds - even an African desert tortoise - many of which would have faced almost certain death had they not found their way there.

"The animals that come here are out of options," said Lisa LaVerdiere, who founded one of the nation's first home-for-life animal sanctuaries, in Wisconsin's St. Croix Valley, in 1999, and hopes to replicate its success in communities around the country.

"We take them or they're put to sleep," she said.

LaVerdiere has staked an increasingly popular place in the often fractious debate over animal welfare, where advocates argue the ethics and realities of no-kill vs. traditional shelters, and adoption into a home is the overriding goal.

Her nonprofit organization offers what she calls "a third door" for animals that in the past had just two: adoption or euthanasia.

"Our goal is to give these animals a true home, a good quality of life," said LaVerdiere, a lawyer who developed the concept while volunteering with a Twin Cities no-kill shelter in the 1990s.

"When you think that 4 (million) to 6 million animals are euthanized a year, we need to think more

expansively about what it means to have a home."

LaVerdiere's third door opens onto a gated compound of new but modest buildings, fenced runs and open wetlands and prairie about an hour and a half northwest of Eau Claire.

Every animal here has a story, many horrifyingly tragic, and yet they appear content, adjusted.

Ben, a shepherd pup, blinded and brain-damaged by a beating, jumps playfully in circles as a photographer shoots his picture. Ashley, a chow mix paralyzed by a stomp to the spine after she'd wandered into a homeowner's yard, tears across the grassy run in what can best be described as a wheeled prosthesis.

Inside one of the three catteries, Kobi hobbles along on the stumps of her legs. The brown tabby had been found in a park, his ears, all four paws and tail severed.

Not all of the animals have been abused. Some, including Chako, were surrendered by loving owners who could no longer care for them. Chako's owner pays a monthly fee, but about 10% of the animals arrive through the Angel Care program that offers care for life in return for a one-time fee.

Goliath, a 30-pound Sulcata African tortoise, was found abandoned.

Candy, a 20-year-old male Moluccan cockatoo, has all the charm of a gold-chain-wearing, disco-dancing lothario - he shouts "Hey babe" and worse at the cats and visitors on tours - and might be considered ill-mannered.

"He's destructive and he bites," said LaVerdiere, who estimates the bird could live to be 80. "I wouldn't go out of my way to get 10 of him."

Yet Candy's found a refuge in this place that has drawn animals from around the country, Canada and Korea, and where every activity is geared toward their care and quality of life.

There's no caging here. Animals that can live together do so, in groups of like temperament. (Candy the obnoxious cockatoo, believe it or not, lives with about 30 cats.) Those that can't - take Hal, who loves people but will fight any dog after a lifetime spent as bait for other pit bulls - get their own "townhouses."

Twenty employees, many of whom have studied animal sciences, fix their meals and administer their meds. They make sure the animals are exercised daily - the appearance of a worker with a leash sets off a deafening cacophony of excited barking - and get plenty of affection.

Those with serious health problems receive even more intensive care. Chako and others that get around on wheeled carts are cleaned and wrapped twice a day to keep their sores from getting infected. There are regular vet visits and, for some, physical therapy.

Such intensive care would have been impossible for Anne Gale of New Jersey. She tried caring for Chako herself after he injured his spine in a freak accident, but found his needs too great.

She drove him cross-country to Home for Life crying much of the way - and again this month as she recounted the memory.

"But when I walked onto the grounds of that place, when I met Lisa, I had no doubt in my mind that I'd found the one place on Earth I was going to be comfortable leaving my dog."

Chako doesn't get around much these days. But for many of the animals, the Home for Life door swings outward, too, not for adoptions but for outreach programs LaVerdiere has developed to educate the public about the sanctuary and the larger societal problems that have landed many of the animals there.

As many as 300 volunteers take animals to visit local hospitals, senior centers, domestic abuse shelters and a home for teenage boys who've had felony-level scrapes with the law.

It's moving, LaVerdiere said, to see the impact the dogs have on the troubled boys whose job it is to train them to become therapy dogs.

"One of the things you notice with these kids is how hard their faces are. Within a couple of classes, their eyes soften, they're so much more receptive," she said.

"They'll think twice before they abuse an animal, I guarantee it."

All of this is financed through donations and grants. The Sanctuary's annual budget: about \$1 million.

Not everyone supports the home for life philosophy. LaVerdiere's been criticized by adoption-only advocates who question a sanctuary's merits as a "home." But others say it plays an important role, especially as the no-kill movement gains momentum.

"This is where I think Home for Life is ahead of the curve," said Nathan Winograd, founder of the No Kill Advocacy Center and author of the book "Redemption: The Myth of Pet Overpopulation and the No-Kill Revolution in America."

"As the no-kill movement becomes dominant, we're going to start to have ethical debates about those animals at the margins. But that doesn't mean we have to wait to save those animals," Winograd said. "If someone is willing to take care of these animals - even if it's not a traditional home - and it's funded with private dollars, what's wrong with that?"

Care for life also means preparing for death at the sanctuary, where the animals' ashes are interred in a memorial garden in the shape of a labyrinth, near the wooded entrance to the grounds. Euthanasia is used, but only when an animal's suffering can no longer be managed with medication, and the decision involves many, including veterinarians and staff.

It's a prospect Anne Gale knows she may be facing when she returns to visit Chako in the coming months. And she will be ready, she said, to do what's right for him.

"I don't want him to suffer," Gale said.

"If he's in pain, if there's no more quality of life anymore, if he can't smile - and huskies smile all the time - Lisa and I will work out what we feel is best."

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