

On the Positive Side: Conference inspires animal advocates

By Michel Meunier

Posted: 07/05/2009 12:00:00 AM MDT

As a no-kill advocate and admirer of national leaders of this movement, it was a real treat to attend the No Kill Conference 2009 in Washington, D.C., which was administered by the No Kill Advocacy Center (NKAC) and the George Washington University School of Law. I and fellow advocates Jean Gilbert and Julie Miller attended this first-ever conference on May 2 and 3.

At first, I was starstruck as only an animal-welfare nerd could be! I met and spoke with Nathan J. Winograd, director of NKAC and author of the book, "Redemption," which was just reprinted in its second edition. I enjoyed a keynote address by Richard Avanzino, considered by many to be the father of no kill and who now serves as president of Maddie's Fund.

It was also great to attend workshops given by our nation's most successful shelter directors of our time: Bonney Brown of the Nevada Humane Society, Susanne Kogut of the Charlottesville SPCA, Mike Fry of Animal Ark in Minnesota, Abigail Adams of Tompkins County SPCA, and Susan Cosby from the Pennsylvania SPCA and founder of the national online no-kill community at www.thenokillnation.com.

The overall conference message - repeated like a mantra - was that we can reform the shelters in our communities by harnessing the community's immense compassion. Creating a welcome environment where people can participate in modern programs and services turns kill rates such as ours (50 percent to 70 percent) into save rates of more than 80 percent. It takes a commitment to overcoming all of the internal obstacles in the way to this success - many of which are internal to outdated shelter operations and philosophies.

For too long, we have brainwashed ourselves into believing that killing was the only way to deal with animal overpopulation, and we found it easiest to lay all the blame at the feet of the irresponsible, evil public. Ironically, it is the majority of this public whose support we must gain in order to turn things around.

In our narrow view of the issues as animal rescuers who only see the worst of the worst, we lose sight that the majority in our public do not represent the bad, irresponsible pet owner; most of us are responsible, loving guardians to furry family members whom we collectively spend billions on each year in the United States. That trend only grows, which is why, as a nation, we are now killing/euthanizing about 4 million homeless animals a year compared with the 24 million we used to put down about 30 years ago.

That said, shelter reform is easier said than done because most shelters are stuck in the ways of the past. They are stuck on doing things the same way yet expecting different results. It is difficult for seasoned shelter leaders to fathom that if you turn a shelter into a welcoming and fun place for people to be, that alone is the single most important change you must make.

"Have fun! Save Lives!!" That's the motto of the Charlottesville SPCA; it could be ours, too. All it requires is a total paradigm shift, which more and more communities are accomplishing in more numbers each year. It is only a matter of time before progressive reform comes to our community, too.

Michel Meunier authors a no-kill blog available at the Las Cruces Sun-News Blogzone. For detailed summaries of the conference workshops she attended, please visit her blog via the Blogzone or at www.nokillrevolution.blogspot.com. Find the archives on the right-hand side, and look for conference-related blog posts in May and June.