

# South Texas



GLORIA FERNZ / STAFF

Tracy Frank and her husband, John Helton, with some of their menagerie at their favorite swimming hole.

## Some dogs get to go to this heaven

By **MARTY SABOTA**  
EXPRESS-NEWS STAFF WRITER

Thirty miles east of San Antonio, a 581-acre ranch dotted with refreshing ponds and graceful trees displays a marvel of creation.

What happens within this tranquil setting is a marvel of compassion.

Eighty-eight abandoned dogs, more than 20 cats, a few horses and some odds and ends critters make their home — possibly forever — at this spacious, no-kill sanctuary in Guadalupe County run by two self-professed animal lovers.

"This is dog heaven," claims Tracy

Frank, who nearly single-handedly started Southern Animal Rescue Association, or SARA, about six years ago.

Funding for SARA — which gained non-profit status last year — comes from donations that have never exceeded \$500. The rest comes from Frank's pocket, or her husband's, John Helton.

People either admire what the former yuppie-turned-puppy lover is doing, or think she's crazy. Frank says she's crazy all right, crazy for helpless creatures.

"I rejoice every time I see a happy puppy chasing a butterfly, kittens playing in a tree, the horses running in the wildflowers, the guinea pigs squealing

when they hear me outside, or just watching the dogs and cats all asleep in the shade in the afternoon," said Frank, 35.

"Lots of people have said to me, after seeing the animals out here, 'They seem so grateful and happy.'"

Dogs appear to have a radar for honing in on Frank.

She found Loretta, abandoned by the roadside, and brought the dog home on her scooter. Sandy, her muzzle disfigured by buckshot, was rescued beside a dump-

■ See **COUPLE/4B**

## **Some dogs get to go to this heaven**

**by Marty Sabota, Express-News Staff Writer  
09/21/97**

SEGUIN -Thirty miles east of San Antonio, a 581-acre ranch dotted with refreshing ponds and graceful trees displays a marvel of creation.

What happens within this tranquil setting is a marvel of compassion.

Eighty-eight abandoned dogs, more than 20 cats, a few horses and some odds and ends critters make their home - possibly forever - at this spacious, no-kill sanctuary in Guadalupe County run by two self-professed animal lovers.

"This is dog heaven," claims Tracy Frank, who nearly single-handedly started Southern Animal Rescue Association, or SARA, about six years ago.

Funding for SARA - which gained non-profit status last year - comes from donations that have never exceeded \$500. The rest comes from Frank's pocket, or her husband's, John Helton.

People either admire what the former yuppie-turned-puppy lover is doing, or think she's crazy. Frank says she's crazy all right, crazy for helpless creatures.

"I rejoice every time I see a happy puppy chasing a butterfly, kittens playing in a tree, the horses running in the wildflowers, the guinea pigs squealing when they hear me outside, or just watching the dogs and cats all asleep in the shade in the afternoon," said Frank, 35.

"Lots of people have said to me, after seeing the animals out here, 'They seem so grateful and happy.'"

Dogs appear to have a radar for honing in on Frank.

She found Loretta, abandoned by the roadside, and brought the dog home on her scooter. Sandy, her muzzle disfigured by buckshot, was rescued beside a dumpster in a convenience store parking lot.

Chestnut was starving and pregnant when discovered with her brother Jeff and their companion Gus, whose ears were so infected he couldn't hold his head upright.

Chestnut's five surviving pups "have gone to loving homes," Frank said, but Chestnut - like most of the adult dogs - probably will be a lifetime resident.

Edgar, a white rat named for rock star Edgar Winter, was found in a box of clothes donated to a local charity. He and other domesticated rodents live in cages in the bedroom.

"Edgar loves cherries, asparagus, smoked salmon and shrimp," said Frank, a former chef, who shares leftovers of gourmet foods she whips up for humans.

Emma was found unconscious in McQueeney, blind and with brain damage. After the abused dog healed, she was adopted by SARA volunteer Judy Gossett.

"It's amazing how they turn around within a couple of months," Helton said.

Recently, Helton and Frank retrieved four puppies from under an old piece of tractor equipment that presented a formidable barrier of stinging nettles, cactus and yellowjackets.

"If you see something at your mercy, something you have absolute power over, how people use it is indicative of their character," said Helton, 34. "Unfortunately, not everyone is like Tracy."

The stray animal problem is profound, Frank said.

"In the San Antonio area alone last year, more than 45,000 dogs were put to death by shelters and animal control," she said. "That's why we are trying so hard to provide an alternative to the standard practice of euthanasia. Every animal deserves a chance, not just the fluffy purebreds, but all of the animals that are in need of our help."

The daughter of a "macho hunter," Frank was a rodeo competitor in barrel racing and roping steers in her younger days.

Then, at age 16, she found a seriously injured German shepherd in the rain and took the animal to a veterinarian. Despite her efforts, the dog died, leaving a lasting impact on the sensitive teenager.

From then on, there was no turning back.

By the time she was an adult and working at a restaurant in Austin, Frank had 10 dogs living on her 10- acre farm south of the capital.

She met Helton at work, and when he met her "family," he thought: "This girl is really interesting."

Still, he said, "I never really imagined being in the middle of 88 dogs."

Helton's job as a scenic artist for the movies helped finance Frank's venture - a costly endeavor due to veterinarians' bills, food and other necessities.

They married, but money for an engagement ring was diverted to the animals .

"I still haven't got an engagement ring, but I don't care," Frank said with a laugh. "I'm not going to die thinking about all the possessions I have."

After a while, the couple and their furry family outgrew their home. So they took up Frank's father's offer to make their homestead on one of his properties - the current SARA site.

It wasn't easy at first. Their "home" was an old milking barn in need of walls, a phone, electricity, water and plumbing.

Using his artistic skills and some leftover materials from his job with the movies, Helton has patched together a pretty nice place with a shed out back that houses their only toilet and tub.

It's a far cry from when Frank said she was "a ditzzy idiot, a materialistic yuppie."

"All I cared about was money," she said. "Everything had to be name brand and top of the line."

Now, she said, "It's more gratifying to me to spend \$300 on a dog than to spend it on a pair of shoes."

The house is worn, since most of the animals have a run of the place. Sweeping up hair and mopping is a daily nightmare, and slipcovers and furniture are well-chewed.

But, Frank said: "I'd rather live in a barn and have those dogs than live in a mansion."

There are subtle reminders of Frank's past life.

"I've seen her out there feeding the dogs in an old \$300 sweater," Helton said.

And designer sheets adorn Frank and Helton's homemade, king-size bed, but they're shabby and worn from the couple sharing them nightly with at least four dogs.

Frank's lifestyle has changed considerably. Critter care begins at dawn and extends well into the evening hours. Her routine includes feeding, flea dipping, clipping, giving shots, bathing and cleaning pens.

"Picking up feces is a big part of my day," Frank said.

At night, the couple walks with the dogs to a nearby pond so the animals can wash off the day's dust with a little dip.

"They get exercise and we get to sleep better at night," Helton joked.

For Helton and Frank, after sunset is a magical time.

"It's just so peaceful out here in the evening, watching the storms roll in and the dogs play," Helton said.

Some people ask the couple: "Is it worth it?"

They vigorously echo each other in the affirmative.

"They make you feel better," Helton said. "When I come home after work, especially after dealing with some of the phonies in the movie business, I see all the dogs running up to greet me. It cheers me up every time."

Added Frank: "Dogs are just pure bliss."

Recently, Frank gave up her longtime job as a special education teacher to devote herself full time to her menagerie. Helton teaches English as a second language at Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos.

They build additional spacious communal pens when the money is there, but are hampered by expenses such as monthly veterinary bills that usually exceed \$1,000.

In that day's mail, the couple found a \$5 check from a supporter in New Braunfels. So far, the two biggest donations of \$500 apiece have come from someone making a memorial for a dog and another dog lover who was unable to care for a stray dog and gave SARA the dog and the money.

Publicity such as this article, they said, will probably generate more unwanted animals on their doorstep, but little financial help.

They're at the point now where they have to start saying no to people wanting to drop off animals.

"We're trying to reserve SARA for desperate cases," Frank said.

The animal enthusiast admits, "It would be real easy to get real discouraged."

But both are praying for a miracle, one that would help them realize their dream.

That dream is to build a veterinary clinic staffed partially by volunteer doctors, pay off veterinary bills, hire an employee to ease some of the workload, build an isolation area for sick animals and buy a fax machine, copier and printer for their computer.

"Unfortunately, we're out here in the middle of nowhere," Frank said of their lack of support. "We're just trying to help some animals. It takes time. It can't happen overnight."

The two rescuers have exhausted a lot of avenues looking for aid. One recent money-making brainstorm was to stage a Woodstock-like concert.

"We'd call it Livestock," Helton said.

But even if the financial miracle doesn't happen, the miracle of love that saves these unwanted animals will continue, the couple promises.

"Tracy has found what she wants to do," Helton said. "She has her purpose."