

Animal Lover Runs Amazing Sanctuary

***By Carol Coughlin, Staff Reporter The San Marcos Daily Record
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We Americans love our pets.

At least, that's what we claim.

And we seem to have an especially soft spot in our hearts for puppies and kittens.

But kittens and puppies turn into cats and dogs, and unfortunately, it seems that for many pet owners, that's when the love stops.

Each year in the United States, 22 million dogs are abandoned. The average length of time most people keep a dog is only two years — but the average lifespan of a dog is 15 years.

And each year in the United States, more than 14 million dogs and cats — and puppies and kittens — are destroyed by animal shelters and animal control facilities, and millions more are taken in by shelters and other animal rescue organizations, never to leave those places again.

For animal lover Tracy Frank, founder and executive director of the Southern Animal Rescue Association (SARA), a non-profit, no-kill animal sanctuary in Seguin, those numbers are disturbing, disheartening — and just plain wrong.

"That's too many," she said. "It's just so sad that people aren't responsible."

Because of her tender heart and deep love of animals, Frank started rescuing dogs and cats in 1996, simply because she kept coming across them abandoned along the road and couldn't stand to leave them there to starve to death or be run over by cars. But she didn't like dropping them off at area shelters, where she knew most of them would end up euthanized.

Fortunately for Frank — and for the animals she found — her family owned 581 wooded acres near Seguin that was near-perfect for her needs. She began a no-kill shelter there in March 1996 so these abandoned animals could be adopted — or, if homes could not be found for them, could live out their natural lives in safety and in relative peace.

"SARA is dedicated to rescuing and rehabilitating unwanted animals," Frank said. "Not just dogs and cats, but other animals. We take all animals in."

"We find homes for them whenever possible, but if not, they get a permanent home at SARA, regardless of whether or not they have special health needs or temperament problems."

Most of the animals Frank and her crew rescues are abandoned animals, discarded by their owners.

"Last year, when I was gone one day, a man drove up with puppies in the trunk of his car, and some of my employees turned him away. I said, 'How could you have let him drive off with those puppies in the trunk?' It just broke my heart. It haunts me. I'm sure they're all dead," she said.

"But we do discourage accepting people's pets. We don't want to take people's pets — we're not that kind of shelter. We're just there for the dire cases, for animals left on the side of the road."

Frank and her crew rescued a little cocker spaniel whose fur was totally matted and whose ears were so infected Frank said she could smell them at a distance. The dog required surgery for an injured eye, was not neutered and had heartworms.

"At first, he used to be so aggressive — you'd try to pet him, and he'd turn around and try to bite you," she said. "Now, he sleeps in the bed, and jumps up and licks you in the face."

"Dogs are amazingly resilient in their capacity to love and forget," she added. "I've seen animals that were so mistreated, it breaks your heart. But they're happy at SARA, and they come to trust you."

"Sometimes it takes longer, but only 1-2 percent of our animals are truly unadoptable. We keep the dangerous dogs contained, but there aren't that many of them. We've got a pit bull dog who had her ears cut off with scissors, and was burned with cigarettes to make her mean — and it worked. Now she can't go anywhere else."

One pig she and her crew rescued had overgrown hooves and tusks and was found among a towering mound of garbage, complete with piles of old tires.

"These people lived in abject poverty. Their place was disgusting. You couldn't even see the pig in the midst of all the garbage," Frank said.

"And they didn't want anyone to take him away because they were going to eat him," said Keith Giles, Frank's assistant.

They rescued the pig and several cats, but were told by the animals' owners that they had gotten there too late to take the dogs, who had all been run over or shot.

"Then, as we were leaving, the woman asked if we had any small, terrier-type dogs, like she wanted to adopt one from us," Frank said. "We said 'no, you should never have another dog.' They had no business having a pet at all."

Currently Frank's SARA provides a home for 440 dogs, 140 cats and five pigs, who live in spacious communal enclosures with plenty of room for exercise and play. That's wonderful news for those animals.

But the bad news is, more and more animals are rescued and brought to SARA nearly every day, although Frank and her helpers work hard to get as many of them adopted as possible.

"The problem's just so profound. I don't know what the answer is," she said.

But Frank said she and her animals at SARA would be lost without the great help she has gotten from such area corporations as HEB and Wal-Mart. Last year, HEB donated more than 110,000 pounds of dog and cat food to SARA. The Wal-Mart Distribution Center in New Braunfels is also a significant contributor of the products SARA needs for the animals.

She also said SARA is strongly committed to spaying and neutering dogs and cats as the best way to achieve "Zero Unwanted Pet Population Growth." SARA incorporates spaying and neutering into their program through volunteer veterinarians, cash donations and adoption agreements.

"We ask people to please adopt a pet — don't buy one, and don't breed them," she said. "If everyone did that, the problem would be over. Did you know that for every human baby born in the U.S., seven puppies are born?"

Because of the amazing number of unwanted and abandoned dogs and cats that Frank and her crew have saved, SARA is now full beyond capacity, Franks said, and with the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks diverting people's attention and their donations from local events and local needs, SARA is beginning to have financial difficulties.

"Things are so dire right now," Frank said. "It's so hard not to get discouraged, because there are so many good things that almost happen financially — but don't."

SARA will host an animal adoption day in San Marcos on Saturday, Nov. 24 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at The Cornucopia Health Food Store, 1104 Thorpe Lane, Suite J, which is across from HEB. People wishing to adopt a puppy or other animal from SARA will be able to fill out an application then. SARA charges a \$75 fee to adopt a neutered dog or cat, which helps to defray the cost.

"We usually don't do on-the-spot adoptions," Frank said. "We believe in having a waiting period. We just think it's better that way. I've seen too many people be impetuous, and just want a dog immediately. But after a day or two, they find out they really don't want the animal. So we like to make sure people are serious, and we want to make sure the animal will get a proper home."

Besides featuring puppies available for adoption, SARA will offer T-shirts and notecards for sale to help raise funds. SARA will not be able to bring cats, but will have photos and information available on adopting them. SARA is also looking for people to sponsor needy animals at the shelter that are waiting for adoption or are unadoptable.

SARA will also be holding their annual fundraising raffle on Dec. 8, which generates important operating funds. They will sell 300 tickets at \$100 each; tickets can be bought individually or by a group of people. The winner or winners of the raffle will get \$10,000; they may either keep the money or donate it back to SARA. SARA keeps the remaining \$20,000 raised to keep the facility going.

"Since there are only 300 tickets, you have pretty good odds of winning," Frank said. "It's a tax-deductible donation to charity, even if you don't win."

For more information on SARA, call them at 830-401-0280 or contact them via e-mail at sarasanc@swbell.net, or visit the website: www.sarasanctuary.org. Anyone wishing to make a donation to SARA may mail one to: Southern Animal Rescue Association, P.O. Box 813, Seguin, TX 78155.

SARA is also hosting a vegan Thanksgiving dinner and volunteer workday at their facility in Seguin on Thanksgiving Day. Call for details.