

Spotlight: Monroe County Humane Association

Member since 1997

By Kasey Husk

When Monroe County Humane Association education program director Sarah DeLone first started bringing her “pet partner” with her for therapeutic programs at Middle Way House’s transitional housing organization The Rise, one little girl would invariably have the same reaction each visit.



She would scream and leap onto a table in fear. But under the soothing presence of Journey the German shepherd, DeLone says, “after a certain amount of time she was one of the first waiting to meet us at the door to walk and interact with the dog—and she decided she wanted to become a veterinarian.” Fostering such positive relationships with animals is what the Monroe County Humane Association has been all about for more



Courtesy photo

than half a century. Since its inception in 1956 as the county’s first animal welfare

organization, the group’s mission has been “to responsibly and compas-

sionately protect, advocate and educate for animal welfare in our communities.”

Today, the bulk of those efforts are in educational and therapeutic programs offered to everyone from preschoolers to senior citizens, says Sara Peterson, MCHA chair. But the organization also works closely with other local welfare groups to help defray the cost of spaying, neutering, and vaccinating pets, and sometimes helps in animal-rescue situations such as puppy mills or instances of animal hoarding, she says.

Though once the Humane Association was responsible for running the Bloomington Animal

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Shelter, the organization is now run by the city. As Peterson says, “the city manages the animal side and we manage the people side.”

In many cases, that means reaching kids early to educate them about topics like animal safety, pet care and responsible pet ownership. DeLone brings “animal ambassadors” to the local schools to teach people at all grade levels, and she says, “help promote animals, and empathy and responsibility toward all animals.”

The organization also offers a weeklong “Paws and Claws” camps for animal-lovers ages 7 to 12 years old to learn about animal welfare—with plenty of interaction with animal ambassadors, of course. Registration for the sessions, held in July and August, opens March 1.

“If you reach kids early and get them thinking about animals and animal welfare, then later when they become adults we hope they’ll have more responsible behaviors with animals, and we hope, lower levels of relinquishments,” says DeLone, who has been the organization’s program director for 13 years.

The Humane Association’s therapy animal programs, meanwhile, help bring comfort to those who are struggling. Pet partners and their handlers—who go through an eight-hour certification program to become registered—visit nursing homes and hospices to spend time with patients and their families, DeLone says, in addition to visiting places such as The Rise.

Other pet partners, meanwhile, simply lend their calming presence to



Courtesy photos



help reluctant readers overcome their fears. Through the organization’s read-

ing assistance programs, schoolchildren are given the opportunity to practice

their skills by reading out loud to an animal, which has been shown to help stressed students reduce their heart rate and blood pressure and increase their focus. After all, Peterson notes, the child can be assured that a dog isn’t going to correct a mistake or judge them for an error.

“It’s just turning what is a chore into something enjoyable,” DeLone says, adding that “it’s more a reward: they aren’t forced to read aloud; they get to read aloud to the dog.”

The therapy dogs work with the same group of about 20 readers each week at Edgewood Intermediate School, DeLone says. They also participate in drop-in programs at the Monroe County Public Library, serving about 400 to 600 young readers each year.

Right now the program has 16 handlers with 20 animal partners, DeLone says. But MCHA has recently become part of the regional group, Hoosier Pet Partners, which will allow it to coordinate with other groups to expand its reach

even further.

The organization also plays a role in helping reduce the number of pets that wind up in shelters through its program to help lower the cost of spaying and neutering animals. Depending on the amount of funding it has available, the Humane Association offers vouchers that essentially subsidize the cost of the procedure, often working in conjunction with PetsAlive to lower that organization’s already-reduced rates, Peterson says. In some situations, people in need of assistance can sometimes have their animals “fixed” for \$20 or even less.

And, Peterson says, the organization—which brings in about \$250,000 a year—does it all with funding from its two yearly fundraisers, individual donations

and the occasional grant. Its annual benefit auction and dinner, Tails on the Town, is planned for April 26 at the Indiana Memorial Union’s Alumni Hall and will have “Rio Carnivale” as its theme. The organization’s other major event, the Run for the Animals 5K and Barktoberfest, a community festival with events for children and animals, is planned for the fall.

Going into 2014, the organization’s first order of business will be finding a new executive director to take the helm since the departure of its former long-term leader. But, adds Peterson, “from a program perspective, one of the goals is to become a more active and visible player in community coordination around disaster concerns.”



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