

Just Imagine:

Saving Shelter Animals One Adoption at a Time

Imagine living alone in a very small home with only four walls. Three of the walls are solid concrete walls, painted white or gray with nothing on them. The fourth is not actually a wall at all, but instead a gate. People walk past your home at all hours of the day and evening. Some stop to look at you, but few talk to you. Most just ignore you completely. You sleep on a cold, hard floor, or if you're lucky, on a thin towel or sheet. Although the landlord does her best to keep the place clean and sanitary, diseases are rampant and many of your neighbors are sick. The noise in the neighborhood is unbearable—loud and constant, day and night—but you have no control over it. In fact, you have no control over anything, including whether you live or die. The hardest part, however, is that before you were brought here, you had a pretty good life with a soft place to sleep and a family that loved you and took care of you. Although you don't know it, you'll never see them again, and every time someone walks past your gate, you raise your head to see if it's your family that has come back for you. Sadly, it never is.

This is the life of a surrendered shelter dog. It happens every day at animal shelters around the country. Families move and cannot take their dogs. Landlords find out about a dog and threaten eviction if the pet isn't removed. The owner of the dog dies and family members don't want to keep it. In these unfortunate situations, pets are often surrendered to animal shelters where they are put into small cages with hundreds of other small cages alongside them with sick, howling, and barking dogs inside, and wait to be adopted or euthanized.

Sad story, isn't it? Imagine what it's like for the dog. It's why surrendered dogs often become depressed and anxious in shelters. Making matters worse, dogs who are emotionally distressed often behave in ways that lessen the likelihood of adoption. For example, they bark a lot, lie in the back of their cages, and don't interact with potential adopters. Because of this, they often remain in shelters longer and are exposed to diseases, such as kennel cough, coccidia, and tape worms. If they get too old or too sick in the shelter, they sometimes have to be euthanized.

If you could help a dog like this, wouldn't you? Thanks to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), you can help. In 2010, the Louisiana Division of the ASPCA (SPCA/LA) started the Adoption Ambassador (AA) program. It began with a small group of volunteers who not only fostered shelter dogs, but also took them out into the community and actively tried to find homes for them. Because the program was so successful, SPCA/LA began recruiting adoption ambassadors from the community, and because that was so successful, the AA program spread to other states (ASPCA Professional: *The Birth of Adoption Ambassadors*). Fortunately for me, one of those states was Florida.

The Humane Society of Broward County (HSBC) recently joined with ASPCA to start an Adoption Ambassador program at its shelter in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. I learned about it when I was searching for community service opportunities. I discovered that because most of the animals at HSBC are brought there by families who are no longer able to care for them, it is the perfect type of shelter for an AA program. I also discovered that HSBC has a Teen Adoption Ambassador program where teens can serve as adoption ambassadors and earn community service hours by caring for AA dogs, walking them with their "Adopt Me" vests on, taking them to dog-friendly community events, making and handing out signs about them, and promoting their availability using social media (Humane Society of Broward County).

As an animal lover who has three shelter pets of my own, the AA program looked like a perfect opportunity for me to get involved and make a real difference in the lives of distressed shelter animals. I attended the training in January, 2014 and have been an HSBC Teen Adoption Ambassador ever since. (My mother is my AA partner because the program requires that all Teen Adoption Ambassadors have a parent partner who agrees to take care of the pet while the teen is at school.) In addition to providing a temporary home for AA dogs, I'm responsible for helping them become more adoptable by giving them training, socialization, and any medical care they may need (all food, supplies, and medical care for AA animals are provided by HSBC). I then use what I know about the dogs' needs and habits to best match each dog with the right family. Here is how it works.

When someone shows an interest in adopting one of my Ambassador pets, I conduct an interview (supervised by my mom) with the potential adopters to determine if the pet would be a good fit for their home. If so, I complete the adoption paperwork and have HSBC do a background check to make sure the person doesn't have a negative history with the shelter. If all goes well, I collect the adoption fee and turn the pet over to their new forever family!

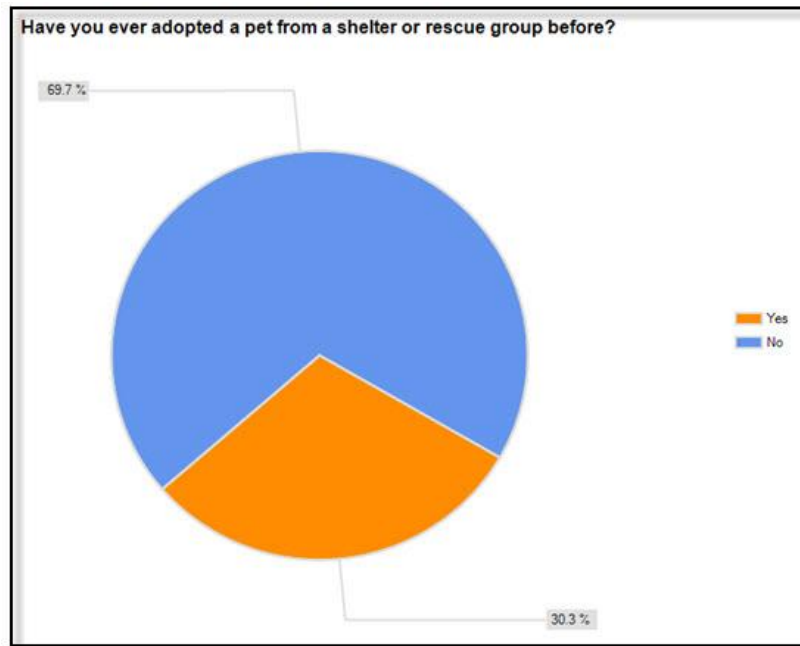
In the past four months, I have helped three shelter dogs find forever families, and I'm currently fostering a medical needs dog that will soon be ready for adoption (see Appendix A). Although it's sad to say good-bye (and I miss them a lot) when I find an adopter, I know that I've done a good thing for each of them. I also know that as soon as I find a great home for one, I can begin helping another one find its forever family. I like to think of it as saving lives and ending suffering one adoption at a time, and the great news is that preliminary research on the AA program suggests that it actually does both of these things.

In 2010, the Louisiana SPCA (LA/SPCA) conducted a study to determine the impact of its Adoption Ambassador program. They studied two groups of dogs: one group was adopted directly from the shelter and one group was adopted through the AA program. Researchers looked at many variables, including the time it took the dogs to be adopted, history of the adopters, and returns. They also asked adoption ambassadors to complete a survey about each dog in the AA group.

The results showed that although it took slightly longer for AA dogs to get adopted, the return rate for the AA dogs (2 percent) was significantly lower than for the dogs adopted directly from the shelter (14 percent). In addition, the research discovered that AA dogs seem to be getting adopted by a new type of adopter. For example, only 30.3 percent of the people who adopted AA dogs had previously adopted shelter animals (see Chart 1); most (46.2 percent) had purchased their pets from breeders (see Chart 2). AA adopters also found their AA dogs through many different sources instead of the traditional method of adoption, which is going to the shelter or its website (see Chart 3). Although more studies have to be done, this preliminary research suggests that the AA program provides more opportunities for shelter dogs to be adopted by opening up a new market of potential adopters and adoption opportunities. In addition, not only does the AA program increase capacity at shelters, it improves the quality of life for AA animals, decreases the likelihood of an adopted animal being returned, and saves many lives (ASPCA Professional, *The Research*).

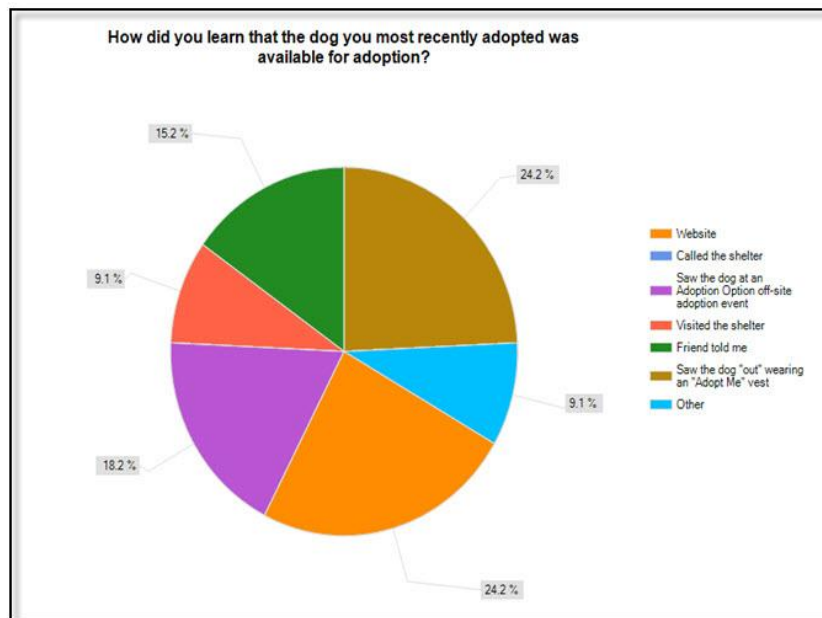
Since it began in September, 2012, the HSBC's AA program has adopted out over 300 surrendered animals, and I am very proud to be a small part of its overall success. The program is becoming so popular that trainings for new adoption ambassadors are usually held once a month, and with each new volunteer, more and more surrendered dogs are being saved from depression,

Chart 1: Percent of AA adopters who adopted from a shelter or animal rescue agency



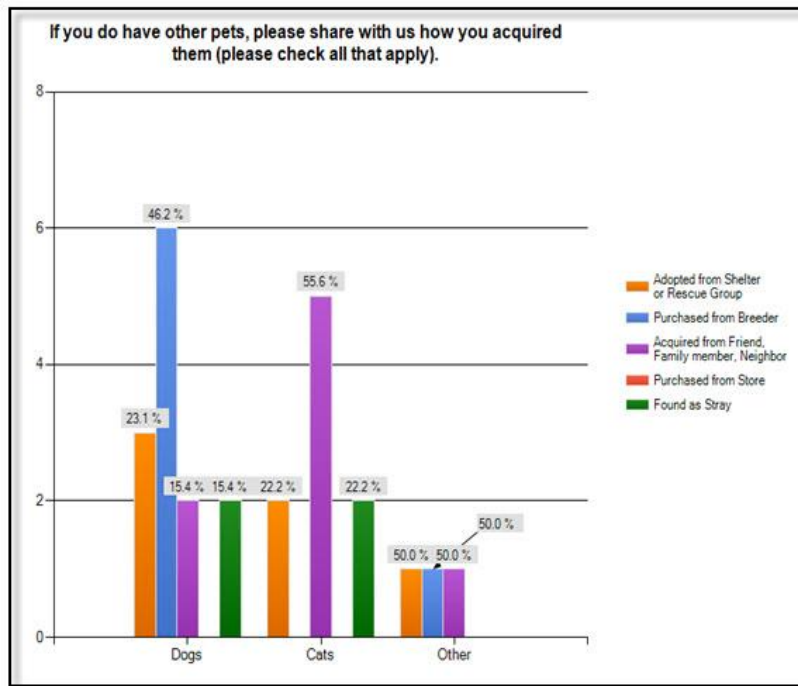
Source: ASPCA Professional: The Research
(<http://www.aspcapro.org/research-behind-adoption-ambassadors>)

Chart 2: How AA adopters learned about their pet's availability



Source: ASPCA Professional: The Research
(<http://www.aspcapro.org/research-behind-adoption-ambassadors>)

Chart 3: How AA adopters found previous pets



Source: ASPCA Professional: The Research
(<http://www.aspcapro.org/research-behind-adoption-ambassadors>)

anxiety, diseases, and possibly death. All it takes is someone willing to temporarily open up his or her heart and home to a pet that has lost its home and its family.

Imagine the possibilities if just one percent of the 1.7 million people who live in Broward County would become an adoption ambassador (United States Census Bureau, *Broward County*), or one percent of the 318 million people in the United States, or even better one percent of the 7 billion people in the world (United States Census Bureau, *U.S. and World Population Clock*). Can you imagine a world without a need for animal shelters? It can happen ... by saving lives one adoption at a time. Just imagine.

References

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Appendix A

Taz – a 7 year old Chow/Lab mix who was surrendered
after living with the same family for seven years



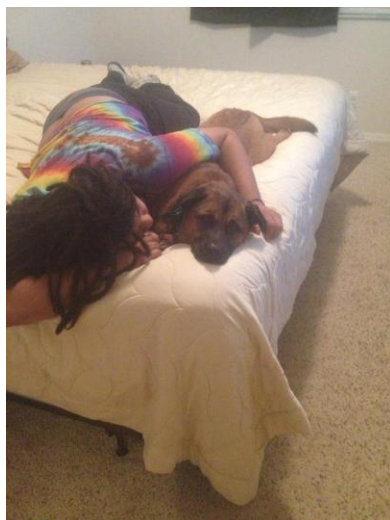
Taz on his first day at my house



Taz and me getting to know each other



Taz getting ready for a walk with his "Adopt Me" vest on



Taz with his new forever family!

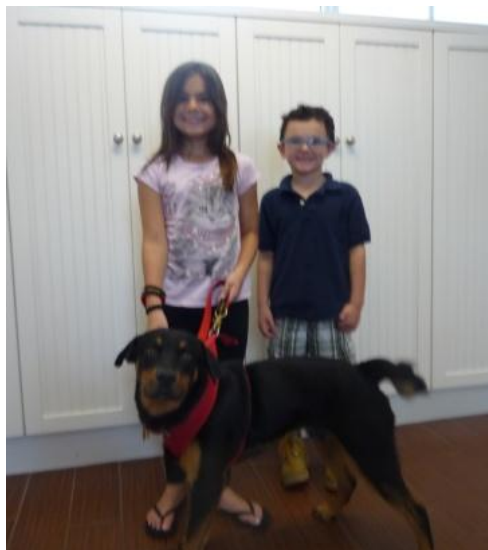
Gravy – a 1 year old Staffordshire mix who was surrendered
to Broward County Animal Care and transferred to HSBC



Gravy when he first came to my house



Getting to know Gravy



Gravy's new forever family!

Boss – a 2 year old Papillion/Pomeranian mix who was surrendered by his owners because they were moving and could not take him with them



Boss after eye surgery at HSBC



Boss getting comfortable at my house

Boss was adopted after only two days by a wonderful family with two children, but they didn't want to be photographed.

Bear – a 1 year old pup that was brought to HSBC with two broken legs. The veterinarian believes that he was the victim of animal abuse, but there was not enough proof for an arrest. He is living with us as he recovers from two surgeries where pins were implanted into his legs. Once his legs heal, he will be available for adoption as an AA dog.



Bear in surgery to repair his broken legs



Bear recovering at our house



Bear sleeping off the anesthesia after his second surgery; one cast was removed



Bear with a splint to replace his cast

Bear has the strangest sleeping positions!